



Northern Ireland
Assembly

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Boyle, Ms Michaela (West Tyrone)
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Campbell, Gregory (East Londonderry)
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Givan, Paul (Lagan Valley)
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Sheehan, Pat (West Belfast)
Spratt, Jimmy (South Belfast)
Storey, Mervyn (North Antrim)
Sugden, Ms Claire (East Londonderry)
Swann, Robin (North Antrim)
Weir, Peter (North Down)
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Wilson, Sammy (East Antrim)

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 18 May 2015

The Assembly met at 12.00 noon (Mr Speaker in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Speaker's Ruling: Respect

Mr Speaker: Before we commence today's business, I would like to return to remarks that were made in the Chamber last week by Mr Campbell, which resulted in two points of order being raised. I agreed to review the Official Report and refer back to the matter should it be necessary.

There was nothing technically out of order in what was said. I am, however, of the mind that not so much in his particular words, which I suspect were carefully chosen, but in the tone and nature of his contribution, Mr Campbell crossed a line by referring to decisions that were made by a deceased Member who, obviously, can no longer speak for himself. Deliberately or inadvertently, he ignored other Members' reaction and, even when given the opportunity, failed to clarify his remarks to make them more acceptable to the House.

I have been considering the standard of debate over recent weeks and I have now decided, therefore, to make a new ruling to make it very clear to Members what I expect in this Chamber. In 2009, my predecessor ruled on standards of debate, making it clear that he would no longer make judgements on the basis of particular words or phrases but would, instead, judge Members' remarks against the standards of courtesy, good temper and moderation. This approach has stood the test of time, and, since being in office, I have been pleased to see most Members adhering to these high standards, expressing their views forcefully but ensuring that the nature of their remarks does not become ill-tempered or discourteous.

Unfortunately, not everyone has risen to this challenge and, from time to time, particularly in recent weeks, a few Members have made remarks that fell below the expected standards of courtesy, good temper and moderation. In making these comments, Members failed to

show respect for other Members and this is unacceptable in a modern debating Chamber. The Members in this Chamber represent a society of diverse views and cultures. If we do not treat each other with respect in here, what example are we giving to wider society? That is why I want to build on the standards of courtesy, good temper and moderation by setting out an additional requirement of respect.

Every elected Member has the right to be here, the right to hold his or her own views and the right to express those views in the Chamber. This does not mean that they cannot challenge and probe each other effectively, but they must do so in a way that shows respect. Members have shown that they are well able to take and listen to contrary arguments, probe them through interventions, and then articulate their own approach without shouting down other Members, finger-pointing, or talking loudly to their neighbours in their seats to demonstrate that they are not prepared to listen to what others have to say.

From today, my focus will be on Members showing one another respect in this Chamber, creating a space that allows Members to express themselves, probe others and hear answers without it degenerating into schoolyard name-calling and grubby attacks on personal integrity. This does not mean that debate will be stifled. Rather, it will allow Members to speak and be heard, make their views known and defend them when scrutinised. That is appropriate and robust debate, and it is what I want to see in this Chamber.

I will conclude by saying that Members should be in no doubt that, if they fail to show respect, I will ask them to reconsider their actions and move to impose sanctions if they do not.

For the benefit of those Members not in the Chamber, I will issue a copy of this ruling by letter to all Members this afternoon. Let us move on.

Committee Membership

Mr Speaker: As with similar motions, the motion on Committee membership will be treated as a business motion and there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That Mr Jim Wells replace Mr Peter Weir as a member of the Committee for Finance and Personnel; that Mr Gary Middleton replace Mr Peter Weir as a member of the Committee for the Environment; that Mr Sammy Douglas replace Mr Gary Middleton as a member of the Committee for Social Development; that Mr Jim Wells replace Mr Alex Easton as a member of the Public Accounts Committee; that Mr Paul Givan replace Mr Sammy Douglas as a member of the Committee on Procedures; and that Mr Tom Buchanan replace Mr Sammy Douglas as a member of the Committee on Standards and Privileges. — [Mr Weir.]

Assembly Commission: Membership

Mr Speaker: Following the appointment of Mr Peter Weir as Chairperson of the Committee for Education, a vacancy exists on the Assembly Commission. The next item on the Order Paper is a motion to fill that vacancy. It will be treated as a business motion, so there will be no debate. Before we proceed to the Question, I advise Members that this motion requires cross-community support.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That, in accordance with Standing Order 79(4), Ms Paula Bradley be appointed to fill the vacancy on the Assembly Commission. — [Mr Weir.]

Executive Committee Business

Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007 (Disclosure of Patient Registration Information) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): I beg to move

That the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007 (Disclosure of Patient Registration Information) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 be affirmed.

Members of the Assembly should know that this regulation, which is under the consideration of the House today, is part of a wider programme of work to utilise existing government information for the production of population and social statistics.

The Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007 created a new non-ministerial department, known as the Statistics Board, to provide and safeguard the production and publication of official statistics that serve the public good. The Act extends to Northern Ireland, and these regulations are made under powers contained in that Act. The regulation allows the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA), through the board, to access simple demographic information from the medical card register. It follows similar legislation in Great Britain. Although the regulations will allow access to personal information, it is forbidden to publish any information that could identify an individual, and the information must be held under conditions of strict security.

The data will be used solely to help produce population statistics and inform the delivery of the next census of population. The regulations were considered by the Committee for Finance and Personnel and the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and no objections were raised. Therefore, I recommend that the regulations be affirmed.

Mr McKay (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her opening remarks. Indeed, I congratulate her, as this is the first time that I have spoken since her appointment. On behalf of the Committee, I wish her well in the time ahead.

As the Minister outlined, the regulations will enable DHSSPS to disclose selected demographic information from patient registration records to the Statistics Board and onwards to NISRA for the purpose of producing population statistics and assessing census returns. The information disclosed under the regulations will not include the health or condition of, or the care treatment provided to, any patient.

The policy proposals contained in the rule were considered by the Committee on 4 March. Given the role of the Health Department in the rule, the Committee agreed to copy the initial briefing paper on the proposed rule to the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety for comment. That Committee noted that at its meeting of 11 March. Having received no further comments, the Finance and Personnel Committee proceeded with its scrutiny.

The Committee formally considered the statutory rule at its meeting on 29 April, together with the accompanying report from the Assembly's Examiner of Statutory Rules. The Examiner raised no issues by way of technical scrutiny. The Committee agreed to recommend that the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007 (Disclosure of Patient Registration Information) Regulations (NI) 2015 be affirmed by the Assembly. Therefore, I support the motion.

Mrs Foster: I thank the Chairman for his remarks on my appointment and for his work and that of his Committee and the Health Committee on scrutinising the regulations. That will assist us in deciding on population numbers, and it will also help us to prepare for the next census, which is really the focus of the regulations.

I thank Members for their support, and I ask them to endorse the regulations.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007 (Disclosure of Patient Registration Information) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 be affirmed.

Private Members' Business

Community and Voluntary Sector: Funding Cuts

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer will have 10 minutes in which to propose the motion and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Swann: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the important role of the community and voluntary sector across Northern Ireland in providing effective, efficient and value for money front-line services; accepts that, as a consequence of the 2015-16 Budget, decisions are being made by individual Executive Departments with no consideration of the impact on these services or the effect that they will have on the vulnerable in society; further notes that the ambiguity surrounding the European social fund has also forced many organisations to reduce their staff and their operations; and calls on the Executive to act in a coordinated manner to ensure that the sector and its organisations receive the required level of support and funding allocations.

The motion is not about political point-scoring in any way; rather, it is about trying to raise the real concern in our voluntary and community sector at the minute that a lack of apparent coordination across different Departments and organisations is leaving it without the support or recognition that it feels that it warrants. The work that it does should be realised. It was summed up by an email that I received this morning — I know that other Members did as well — from a gentleman from my constituency who works in the voluntary and community sector. I will read it out, because it sums up the feeling behind the motion.

12.15 pm

He said:

"I've been involved in working and volunteering in the community and voluntary sector for almost 20 years. In that time, I have come to see some of the phenomenal work that is achieved by people with a passion for helping those in need. At a time when things are getting harder for many in society, regrettably, it seems that those who

are in a position for help are in fact the ones who bear the brunt of the cuts. The uncertainty within the sector is having a profound effect on people's well-being and motivation. This should not be.

As I sit on a number of other committees and working groups, I hear on a regular basis how the community and voluntary sector are supporting their colleagues in health, education, etc. Any further cuts to the community and voluntary sector will have a knock-on effect to these services also. It is generally recognised that the community and voluntary sector delivers services that have significant benefits that far offset the costs involved.

In closing, I have no doubt that the Assembly will agree with the motion; however, it is positive affirmation through the action that people want to see, not mere platitudes."

I think, Mr Speaker, that that sums up why we have brought the motion at this time. It is to give that voice to the voluntary and community sector and to show that there is a willingness in the House, the Committees, the Departments and the ministerial team to show that the community and voluntary sector is being and will be recognised for the valuable work that it does.

It was Gandhi, I think, who is alleged to have said that the true measure of any society can be found in how it treats its most vulnerable. That is part of the phrasing we used in our motion. I think that the House has to realise the recognition that we give to those who support the most vulnerable in our society. It reflects a concordat that was signed between the voluntary and community sector and the Northern Ireland Government, albeit in the last mandate.

I think one of the things that brings it home and that again sums up the frustration that the organisations and individuals in the voluntary and community sector feel is that covered in point 4 of the concordat, which lays out the foundation for a partnership based on mutual trust and respect. That is why I ask the Minister today, through the motion, to try to work with his ministerial colleagues, Members and the voluntary and community sector to try to re-engage with a community and a sector that feels that some of that mutual trust and respect has been lost. Many of the organisations now feel that they are being seen as the low-hanging financial fruit within the budget lines and that they are easier cut off. That is

because their voices will not be heard or because three job losses in a small voluntary and community organisation, or four in another somewhere else, will not be as significant as the loss of 100 or 80 jobs or have the overall impact that a large number of job losses has.

It is about the cumulative effect that the voluntary and community sector is feeling at this time and the desire to see that there is a recognition and realisation within the Executive and in this place that the services that it is delivering are vital to Northern Ireland society at this time. Many of the services that it is providing are the preventative services that do not put strains and stresses on the reduced budgets that are coming into our corporate services within health, justice and education.

Some of the examples that many Members are well aware of and that they have raised at numerous times with many Ministers are those in the early years sector, from where £2 million has been cut. It is the voluntary early years services that are suffering the most, and those voluntary organisations are often in the areas that are in most social deprivation and need.

Mr Dallat: Will the Member give way?

Mr Swann: I will, yes.

Mr Dallat: Just on the very point that Mr Swann is speaking on, Lifestart was one of those programmes that gave hope to families with children with special needs that their children might well leave school being able to write and to have basic skills. Does the Member agree that that programme, and others in the voluntary sector, was the key to pointing to real equality in Northern Ireland between not Protestants and Catholics but people who had what they needed and others who did not?

Mr Swann: I fully agree with Mr Dallat. I think that is why we are bringing the motion. Many of those organisations that are working across all sectors in Northern Ireland have seen a small amount of money lost that was enabling them to do the work that they did. They were also leveraging money from other funding streams, other Departments and from outside, such as European money. That money enabled them to do their work and prevented additional costs being put into our corporate services in, as I said, education and health, as well as in the justice sector. The work that NIACRO did through the European social fund (ESF) in preventative justice has now been lost as well. So it is putting additional burdens on the justice system.

A large swathe of organisations that help those not in education, employment or training (NEET) are looking at cuts to their core funding, which puts an additional strain on our colleges, schools and wider society. When those young people have no motivation and nowhere to go, the rest of society and the diversionary services, including the police, are left to pick up the costs. There is a large section of work

In the Minister's replies at Question Time — I think that it was last week or the week before — he showed what I believe is an understanding of what these organisations want and need. However, they do not see a collegiate approach by our Executive to small cuts in funding for one Department that have knock-on effects to another. A recent example that the Committee for Employment and Learning saw was the Bytes Project, which is delivering a vital service in the IT sector across all Departments for young people not in education, employment or training. Its main funder was the Youth Council, but the Department for Employment and Learning made up part of the funding. It was rumoured that the Department was going to reduce its funding, so the Youth Council was looking at its funding. It looked as though that organisation was in jeopardy because of a careless phrase or an inappropriate email. Luckily, the Minister for Employment and Learning changed that decision, which has allowed the Youth Council to put in work. That, however, may be a temporary solution to allow it to prepare an exit strategy.

Among the things that many organisations told us about were the lack of time given by and communication from Departments or the Civil Service that would not allow for an exit strategy or alternatives to be put in place. Take the Pathways to Success EMA. Two days before its funding was due to cease, it received a letter stating that funding would no longer be in place. It was not able to prepare the young people or put other measures in place to support them. It comes down not only to communication between civil servants and the community sector but to a communication problem between Departments about the knock-on effects.

There has been a lot of talk out there about the decimation of the voluntary and community sector. Decimation is a 10% cut. The voluntary and community sector faces far more than a 10% cut. Many in the sector would be happy if they faced a cut of only 10%. I am not building up the Minister just because he is here, but I know that he has an understanding of the work that these organisations do on the ground. I am glad that he is here to represent the Executive

in responding to the motion. The voluntary and community sector is looking for a bit of honesty, respect and wider communication. NICVA met OFMDFM two weeks ago, but it is about respect across all Departments and in the Civil Service. In some but not all cases, such small amounts are involved that Ministers may not be aware of the cuts and their knock-on effect on some voluntary and community organisations.

As for the European social fund, I could go on for the length of another debate —

Mr Speaker: Your time is almost up.

Mr Swann: — and I am sure that that sentiment would be repeated by many Members round the House today. I thank the Minister for coming to the debate and ask Members to support not just the motion but the voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland.

Mr Douglas: I speak as a fairly new member of the Committee for Social Development. I think that I have been on it for 14 minutes.
[Laughter.]

Mr Storey (The Minister for Social Development): You are as knowledgeable as the Minister, then.

Mr Douglas: Yes. As somebody said, I am just as knowledgeable as the Minister. *[Laughter.]* I have been involved in the community and voluntary sector since the 1970s, and I certainly welcome the motion. I got involved in community and voluntary work by accident in the 1970s. During the conflict, I worked with prisoners, ex-prisoners and members of my community. For the past 25 years, I have been involved in community and voluntary activity in east Belfast. So, I have a bit of experience, and I certainly empathise with the fears expressed by many of the groups that they will lose out. Ultimately, some will collapse. I pay tribute to organisations such as the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action, which has raised the profile of these groups and informed us of exactly what is happening, as have other groups.

The voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland is an integral part of the economy. It not only provides employment but works with those from disadvantaged backgrounds, provides support to those who wish to change their life and helps them to fulfil their potential. The organic growth of projects and the ability to be responsive to needs of its communities mean that the voluntary and community sector can often be more

responsive than Departments or government officials when it comes to working at a local level. Last week, I was cycling along the Newtownards Road and passed the Ballymac Centre. At 9.15 pm on a Sunday night, young youth workers were there working on a voluntary basis with some of the most disadvantaged people in our communities. I pay tribute to those people, who work day in, day out in the most disadvantaged communities. As I said, there is a real fear that groups could lose out and disband as a result of this.

I got an email last Friday. I welcome some of the comments from the Chair of the Committee for Employment and Learning. Like him, I got a letter from Greenway Women's Centre. Let me read it out:

"Dear Sammy, I am writing both as a concerned constituent and on behalf of my organisation about the effects of the cuts on the community and voluntary sector, in particular the women's centres, groups and organisations. As a director of Greenway Women's Group, I am aware that Ministers and Departments are under intense pressure to cut money."

There is recognition that things are difficult. Groups out there realise that they are going through times of austerity. It goes on to say:

"I understand that, as a society, we all have to face considerable restraints. However, it is our opinion —"

I agree with this.

" — that cuts to the community and voluntary sector as a whole are unfair and disproportionate, and we write to urge you to consider the impact that this will have on our local community."

That is a big message to us all. There is a sense that we need to do something about this urgently.

Mr Newton: I thank the Member for giving way. Will he agree with me that government cannot, on its own, deliver all the services that the community requires and that, if we do not have a volunteering approach and an innovative and cost-effective approach, society as a whole will lose out through the cuts to this budget in particular?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Douglas: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thank the Member for his intervention. I certainly agree with him. One of the groups that I am sure he is thinking about is Bloomfield Community Association on Hyndford Street, which has been involved for many years. I am sure that you are aware, Mr Speaker, that Van Morrison is from that street. That group is working tirelessly day in, day out, and it has a real fear that it will go out of existence.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Member for giving way. Given the point that his colleague from East Belfast made about a joined-up approach, will he agree with me that it is vital that the councils, as they now have a greater resource, work in collaboration with the Assembly and the community and voluntary sector to deliver a lot of these services?

Mr Douglas: I thank the Member for his intervention. I certainly agree with that. As our current Prime Minister says, "We're all in this together". We are all in this together, and we need to work together to ensure that these groups survive and exist in the future.

As I said, these groups were about throughout the conflict. Many of the groups, the women, young men and others, held their communities together at times when Northern Ireland was falling apart. Last Thursday, when I was at the court, people from the Dee Street playgroup came to see me. The playgroup has been going since the 1970s, and there is a threat to its funding from the Department of Education. I met the Minister of Education, and he has empathy with those groups. I understand the cuts that he is facing, but we need to work together to ensure that the most vulnerable groups in our society get a fair hearing and an opportunity to put their proposals to us so that we can help and support them.

I know that the Minister will reply later, but I just want to pay tribute to him. As my colleague said earlier, he gets it when it comes to the community and voluntary sector. He was out with us recently on the Newtownards Road, and the work that he is doing in supporting some of our most disadvantaged people in society is very encouraging. I welcome the motion and encourage all Members to support it.

12.30 pm

Ms McGahan: Go raibh maith agat. I support the motion and thank the Members who brought it forward to the House. I want to say at this stage that I will not be taking any interventions. The newly elected Tory Government in London

are wedded to austerity. That presents severe challenges to society and citizens in the North of Ireland. Cuts to our block grant by David Cameron's cabinet of millionaires are having drastic consequences for many of our constituents.

Only last week, I received detailed correspondence from a cross-community playgroup in Benburb, County Tyrone, which is most concerned about its operational plans for the next few years and the number of places it can offer, given the cuts that are being made in early years funding. That, in turn, will effectively curb the playgroup's essential fundraising efforts, with cuts to places ensuring a smaller pool of parents and carers to draw from for active support. I have also been lobbied by parents of children attending the Woodland Adventure playgroup in Augher, who have the same issues and who make an important contribution to the rural community in Augher. Those are just two of our much-valued community and voluntary groups that have been in contact with my constituency office regarding concerns on the effective delivery of much-needed services in local communities across Fermanagh and South Tyrone.

Tory cuts to our block grant are putting a massive strain on our community and voluntary organisations and groups. In many areas, rural and urban, that is having a negative effect by setting back much good work that has been progressed to tackle societal and economic disadvantage, as well as groundbreaking attempts to tackle social isolation faced by disadvantaged and marginalised groups.

On the back of David Cameron's election speeches, we await more destructive cuts to the North's budget and to the social welfare system, as well as a referendum that could remove the North from the European Union, with obvious negative effects for all the people of this island. As part of its election manifesto, the Conservative Party pledged to cut another £30 billion, with £12 billion of that impacting on welfare, including child benefit.

We are only just coming out of a period when strong representation had to be made to the Minister for Employment and Learning regarding decisions on whether to allocate much-needed European social fund moneys to community and voluntary organisations and groups such as the First Steps women's centre in Dungannon, which has a strong record of delivering quality training programmes for women from across south Tyrone, which, in turn, boosts their confidence and self-esteem

and encourages their return to the labour market.

Sinn Féin's immediate focus is to work with others to confront these challenges. The outcome of the recent Westminster election presents enormous dangers to Ireland, North and South. During their first five years in office, the Tories, under Cameron, largely disconnected from the peace process and our political institutions. When they did engage, it was almost entirely in a negative way, creating significant difficulties for the Executive and cutting huge amounts of funding from the block grant.

So, what happens next? All the parties in the Executive and the Assembly need to urgently develop a common approach to address the challenges presented by the new Tory Government, especially their attacks on public services and jobs, as well as the good work carried out by our community and voluntary sector, which we pay tribute to today.

Martin McGuinness has taken the first step; he has called on all the Assembly parties to unite against austerity and to seek the additional powers from London to grow the economy. That will be the battlefield for the next term of British Tory rule. Equality, not austerity, is Sinn Féin's way forward.

Mr Rogers: The community and voluntary sector makes an extremely important contribution in its efforts to deliver front-line services. The stringent cuts to that sector are one of the reasons why our Minister has consistently voted against the Budget. The cuts to the community and voluntary organisations are unfair and disproportionate, with little, if any, evidence of an assessment of the impact of the cuts. The cuts come at a terrible cost. We are trying to address the problems that arise for people relying on the services provided by the sector. This is not just an issue for the sector that the Executive can wash their hands off. Many of those cuts directly contradict Executive policy and will cost the Executive in the long term as they struggle to meet the targets that they have set.

For example, there is the Delivering Social Change project, and I remind the House of the objectives of that framework: a sustained reduction in poverty and associated issues across all ages; and an improvement in children and young people's health, well-being and life opportunities. How can the programme work with community and voluntary organisations to tackle social problems within communities if the

sector faces wipeout? From a strategic point of view, that is completely illogical.

To make matters worse, cuts in early years and Sure Start programmes will, despite promises, hit front-line services. Right across our constituencies, groups such as the Dunnaman Children's Centre on the Scrogg Road in Kilkeel in my area make a real difference to children, families and the community at large. Less funding means fewer staff means less support and — something that the Minister was very strong on in his previous role as Chair of the Education Committee — less early intervention for our children, increasing the problems of numeracy and literacy and, indeed, social skills in our schools.

Take, for example, the view of the Newry Confederation of Community Groups, which is a subregional community development organisation that provides support to a large number of local community and voluntary sector groups throughout the area. It has its finger on the pulse, and it is confirming that a continual and disproportionate level of cuts has been applied to the community and voluntary sector to date.

Mr Douglas talked about women's organisations. Women's centres, groups and organisations deliver a wide range of front-line services to the most disadvantaged in the community. However, in order to deliver those services, they must secure different packages of funding from up to eight Departments. Each of those Departments and, in turn, their agencies, has imposed cuts of varying degrees to their budgets. The cumulative effect of all those cuts on organisations will result in the withdrawal of services, including the training and education budget for women, which includes childcare provision; and the support for additional childcare staff and additional staff that enables crèches to take referrals from social services to place vulnerable children in need of care. That knock-on cumulative effect will really hit front-line services.

Mr A Maginness: Will the Member give way?

Mr Rogers: I will.

Mr A Maginness: The Member, quite rightly, raises questions about early years and women's services. However, there is another crucial service, and that is the one carried out by NIACRO in relation to the resettlement of offenders. NIACRO's cut is in the region of 33% — £1.4 million — and the loss of European funding is very significant. That

means less-safe communities; that means that ex-offenders are less likely to gain employment, and there is a huge social deficit in that.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Rogers: I thank the Member for his intervention. I agree fully with him. Furthermore, those groups and projects are not only suffering because of red-marker cuts; they bear the brunt of departmental inefficiencies. We talk about European social funds and the unspent money there that must be returned. From community education to women's centres, thousands of people rely on and benefit from the vital services that the community and voluntary sector delivers. That unspent money has an enormous knock-on effect for the people employed by those organisations and those who avail themselves of them.

Organisations are experiencing delays in funding from DEL due to the fact that the EU Commission has suspended its funding for the third time due to auditing processes. The Minister must address that urgently. It is unacceptable that moneys that those projects and organisations depend on are not materialising due to inefficiencies. That is something that, one assumes, could be easily rectified.

I urge the Executive to recognise the vital work that the community and voluntary sector does. Whilst it has shown itself capable of doing more with less, it is approaching breaking point. Many of the Executive's own policy priorities and targets will not be met without the support of the community and voluntary sector.

Community and voluntary organisations across Northern Ireland provide a lifeline for local people. We need the delivery of local services in our communities to ensure the health and well-being of those most in need and that our children have the right start in life and access to all opportunities.

As the proposer of the motion said, it is positive action, not platitudes, that we need.

Ms Lo: I welcome this debate. As one who worked for many years in the community and voluntary sector, I stress its importance as part of our society and a key provider of services.

In many respects, it is more efficient and effective in interventions on the ground and in the delivery of specific services than government would be directly. That is recognised in a concordat between the sector

and the Executive, although it could probably go further.

I sympathise with the frustrations being expressed by the sector in relation to budget cuts. I also recognise the concerns that the sector is disproportionately bearing the brunt of cuts and the cumulative effect of cuts from various sources. An example of that is the Ballynafeigh Community Development Association in my constituency.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Member for giving way. She spoke about the cumulative impact of cuts. Would she agree that the Executive must be more strategic in budgeting and that Departments must communicate with one another to be more aware of the scale of that cumulative impact of departmental cuts on individual organisations?

Ms Lo: Absolutely. I totally agree.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Ms Lo: Thank you. There has not been a very strategic approach taken by the Executive, in particular by the DUP and Sinn Féin, to decision-making, coordination and budget setting. However, it is important that we do not generalise and say that all Ministers have taken the same approach or made similar decisions that have impacted on the voluntary and community sector. I know that the Minister of Justice and the Minister for Employment and Learning value the sector and rely on it for core aspects of the aims and objectives of their Departments.

However, counterproductive actions have been taken by others. Cutting early years funding entails that the most crucial intervention — at the beginning of education — is undermined, as others alluded to. In education, everything seems to get sacrificed rather than dealing with a segregated system. While I appreciate the large-scale cuts to the budget of the Department of the Environment, I question the rationale of 100% cuts being passed on to many environmental NGOs. Although, under pressure, the Minister has somewhat reversed his position, it will not be until the end of June that many groups will receive clarity on funding. It was also very much a top-down approach, with little consultation with partners in the sector.

There is a focus in this debate on the European social fund. The fund has not experienced a cut. In fact, the current funding round is bigger

than before. However, it is under greater pressure due to cuts elsewhere.

The current round was 1·8 times oversubscribed. Also, due to cuts in spending in other Departments and issues around the formation of the new councils, there may be problems with organisations securing match funding.

12.45 pm

Secondly, the funding is allocated under an open and competitive process. No organisation should have gone into the process with an automatic expectation of funding. Inevitably, this competitive process means that some organisations will be funded and others may not.

Mr Swann: Will the Member give way?

Ms Lo: Yes.

Mr Swann: I appreciate the points that the Member is making on behalf of the Minister. Like me, she has sat through many presentations from ESF organisations to the Employment and Learning Committee which have been expressing that this is not the case. They say that the problem is with the openness and transparency of the application process and with the appeals and scoring mechanisms. There is nothing that the Member has said that has not been taken into account, but there is an awful lot more around the ESF application process that is leaving organisations frustrated.

Ms Lo: Surely. I was about to say that timings of the process are inevitably difficult. The Northern Ireland operational programme was approved by the European Commission in December 2014, and we were one of the first regions across the EU to obtain that approval. Decisions to allocate funding to 65 projects were made before the end of March, allowing for continuity from 1 April, where relevant. Sixty-eight projects have been funded, which amounts to £112 million over three years.

Mr Swann: Will the Member give way again?

Ms Lo: No, sorry. I am running out of time.

Sixty of the projects are related to the community and voluntary sector. That funding will support over 10,000 young people who are not in education, employment or training, over 7,000 people with disabilities, almost 25,000 people who are unemployed or economically

inactive, and it will help over 2,000 families in need.

Mr Wilson: I do not want to go through the long list of organisations in my constituency that have been affected by the reductions to their budgets. Needless to say, whether it is Bookstart, which helps with early literacy, or Good Morning Carrickfergus, Good Morning Larne and Good Morning Newtownabbey, which help people who are isolated by giving them some contact on a daily basis with those who check on their well-being, or community transport, all of them have been affected.

I want to make something very clear at the start. I know that Sinn Féin and the SDLP especially love to put all of this at the door of Tory cuts, but let us look at some of the facts. The £900,000 cut to the arts budget is half the amount of money that we lose each day in Northern Ireland because of the ideological position adopted by Sinn Féin and the SDLP to welfare reform. All of the money that has been lost in early years amounts to one day's repayment to Westminster that we must make as a result of the intransigence on the other side of this House on welfare reform. So, before we start putting the blame on somebody else, let us start looking at the problems that we cause ourselves because of the ideological positions that have been adopted by two parties that have buried their heads in the economic sands and will not recognise the damage they are doing to a lot of the voluntary sector.

The whole budgetary process, where Ministers are advised by civil servants on how and where reductions in budgets need to be made, is biased against those who are outside the statutory sector. It is very unlikely that Ministers are going to receive advice from civil servants that funding to core departmental services should be cut, regardless of whether they are less or more efficient or effective than some of the services created by outside bodies. Ministers are not going to get that kind of advice, and so we get a disproportionate impact, and that is across Departments.

Ms Lo: Will the Member give way?

Mr Wilson: I will give way, yes.

Ms Lo: Will you agree that the voluntary and community sector is seen as an easy target and a lazy option for cuts?

Mr Wilson: Very often, it is seen that way, and I will give you an example. The DRD budget was cut by 5%, yet community transport got a whack

of 37%. The Education budget was reduced by, I think, 2%, yet early years got a reduction of nearly 50%. It is an easy option.

Ms Sugden: Will the Member give way?

Mr Wilson: Yes, I will give way.

Ms Sugden: Will the Member agree that, although it is based on the advice of civil servants, the buck does stop with Ministers and that all Ministers are responsible for making these cuts? I agree with Ms Lo that the community and voluntary sector has been an easy target in this.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Wilson: Of course the responsibility stops with the Minister at the end of the day, but I am trying to show that the budgetary process is biased towards keeping money within Departments rather than looking at whether other organisations deliver the services more effectively, more efficiently, more cheaply, more flexibly and everything else. I believe that we should be keeping on top of Ministers about that issue through questions in the Assembly and through Committees.

It is one thing to rant and rave about these reductions, but what are the kinds of things that we can do? We cannot magic money out of thin air. If it is not there, it is not there. That is why I believe that the first thing that we ought to be doing is challenging some of the budget cuts — even budget cuts made by Ministers from our own parties. It is disappointing that Anna Lo, for example, feels that she has to defend her own two Ministers. Her own two Ministers are as guilty of this as the Ministers in all other parties. Indeed, the motion has been presented by the Ulster Unionists, and the Minister from that party is as guilty as Ministers in other parties. Sometimes, as Back-Benchers, we need to be able to challenge this.

Secondly, we should be looking for alternative forms of money. It will be difficult to get more money from the block grant, but there are new and innovative ways. There is the social investment bond, which I know that the current and previous Ministers of Finance were looking at, whereby we bring in private money along with public money. There are huge business organisations that are queuing up to give money into a social investment bond, and I think that the Assembly does need to look at alternative forms of finance when it comes to this.

The last thing it that there should be an honest assessment of the value of organisations outside the statutory sector, whether those are voluntary, community or whatever. Lastly, some Ministers need to look at their priorities, and I have to say that I find it very difficult that, at a time when we are trying to improve literacy, things like Bookstart are closed down by the Minister of Education while he opens a school in Dungiven for 14 youngsters. All of that money would have paid for the whole of the Bookstart programme.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. It is a bit unfortunate that, following on from the rest of the very positive contributions, we have now had two Members who have introduced discordant notes into the debate. I would have thought that this was an opportunity for all of us to put our colours to the mast in supporting the community and voluntary sector in its quest to have some certainty and stability around future funding. Obviously, in some cases, there are funding deficits in the very near future, which have resulted in the closure of a number of very important and key projects in our community.

In the first instance, I will say, as my colleague Bronwyn McGahan said, that we support the motion. We do not necessarily agree with everything in the motion, but we certainly agree with the substance and the general intentions of it. I do not think that it goes far enough because, first of all, it does not address the problem. I think that, if we are to solve any of these issues, we have to address the core problem, and I think that the motion falls short of that. As I said, we support the motion, because it does give us an opportunity to raise this on behalf of those in the community and voluntary sector and the communities that they work for, represent and, very often, work in. It is important that, generally speaking, we keep the motion and the debate as positive and constructive as possible, because what we are trying to do is to support the community organisations that are trying their level best, sometimes through very challenging circumstances, to provide essential services in a range of communities that are very often, but not always, disadvantaged.

Ms Lo made a point in defence of her Ministers. That is fair enough, but, if she wants to bring that note into the debate, I will have to say that one of her Ministers, Mr Farry, took a unilateral and arbitrary decision on the funding of teacher training colleges. It was a disgraceful and a

purely political and ideological decision, and I told him that in a meeting I had with him.

I do not want to stand here and namecheck every organisation in my constituency and nor do I want to identify individual Ministers, because I think that there is a range of problems. However, just for the record, our party's ministerial team, led by Martin McGuinness, met NICVA recently to hear its concerns, which we share. Obviously, all MLAs from all parties have been working to defend organisations, often in their own constituency but not always just on that selfish constituency interest basis, rather on a wider, regional basis and beyond. Flowing from that, there were discussions in the Executive. The Executive, to their credit, have appointed the two junior Ministers to hold discussions with NICVA and examine what the cumulative effect of the cuts across all Departments will be. The starting point has to be that having a cocktail of funding from different Departments creates a cumulative impact for the better. Clearly, if local organisations can draw money from one Department or another, they can often do a lot more, thus getting a bigger bang for their buck in local communities.

I look forward to the report from the junior Ministers and the Executive's consideration of it. I hope that the Executive come up with firm recommendations on how to go forward with funding for the community and voluntary sector. The sector has to be able to move away from constantly chasing a cocktail of funding, which often makes the organisations unstable, as the staff and members who deliver the services have to devote a lot of their time and energy to seeking funding.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Maskey: No. Sorry. Seeking a cocktail of funding takes an awful lot of their time and energy away from the delivery of services. I therefore hope that the Executive are able to come up with a fundamentally changed environment for those organisations, because the community and voluntary sector faces very significant challenges, as a result of budget cuts but also the transfer of powers to local government. There is a lot of uncertainty and instability in the sector.

I have been speaking to Mervyn Storey since he took up office, and I want to place it on record that there is one Minister — I do not want to comment on all the others, because I have not directly engaged with them as I have with this Minister — who has, in my view, endeavoured to take a broader view of the

impact of the cuts and did his best to make sure that they were minimised. I have no doubt that he has not been able to satisfy many organisations and that we will do battle with him in the time ahead.

The Assembly has to address the core problem, which is cuts, cuts and more cuts from London. The welfare part of that is an insignificant, small amount when set against the rest of the cuts to the block grant. Therefore, any penny spent thus far by the Executive to support welfare recipients is in the pocket —

Mr Speaker: Thank you. I call Mr Sydney Anderson.

Mr Maskey: — of welfare claimants. It is not going into some black hole in London.

Mr Anderson: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I welcome the debate and support the motion. It covers a wide range of funding sources and Departments, and I look forward to my colleague the Minister for Social Development responding on behalf of the Executive.

As an MLA, I am all too aware of the extremely valuable contribution made by the voluntary and community sector to the quality of life of many in Northern Ireland. I could cite many examples of front-line services provided by the sector that are now under severe threat due to cuts. Our Prime Minister, David Cameron, has been an ardent supporter of the vision of the Big Society, which aims to empower local communities to encourage voluntary and community groups to play an ever-increasing role in our society. That is a commendable idea, but we are now witnessing severe financial pressures on the sector, and those pressures are not only stifling its potential growth but threatening its ability to deliver existing services. No one in the sector that I know of is pleading for special treatment; indeed, they accept that cuts are inevitable in the current financial climate. However, with regard to the European social fund, there is a feeling in the community that cuts are not always made fairly or consistently. That leads to much discontent.

1.00 pm

As a member of the Employment and Learning Committee, I want to focus briefly on the second part of the motion, which draws specific attention to the confusion surrounding the European social fund. We face something of an administrative and bureaucratic mess, and, in my view, there is no justification or excuse for

such a mess. Back in February this year, my party colleague Diane Dodds MEP highlighted problems and inconsistencies over applications for the European social fund, a fund that is such a help to community, voluntary and women's groups. Across the sector there was a sense of injustice. It seemed that some applications were being rejected on what appeared to be very flimsy grounds, while others appeared to be treated more favourably.

I appreciate that European-funded schemes can be extremely bureaucratic, but there is really no excuse for the Department for Employment and Learning's poor handling of applications. I do not have time to go into all the details, but there are many failings that left reputable groups in a state of confusion. Many of those groups presented to the Committee. Some were shocked to be told that their paperwork had not been properly completed, and, to cap it all, the subsequent appeal process seems to have been poorly managed. All that has led to a massive loss of confidence in the sector. It has jeopardised jobs and the delivery of much-needed skills and personal development training to disengaged and disadvantaged sections of our community.

I may be wrong, but I am not sure whether the Employment Minister has openly acknowledged his Department's failings in the matter. I note what Ms Lo said when she focused on the ESF, in the sense that it was oversubscribed with funding applications, but I believe that that was maybe an attempt to deflect attention away from the Employment and Learning Minister. I think that the Chair hit on it when he said that it was all about the openness and transparency of the process, rather than the oversubscribing. Indeed, I note that, at the Employment and Learning Committee on 29 April, the Minister took issue with Ms Sugden when she suggested that the process was flawed. Last week in the Chamber during questions for oral answer, the Minister dealt with four questions on the issue in one answer, but I do not really think that he addressed the failings of the process.

ESF is a vital and valuable funding stream that can help in the development of better jobs and a range of vital skills. It opens doors for many who would otherwise struggle. It provides opportunities for people, often young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, to obtain skills that enable them to compete in the job market and therefore helps to stimulate economic growth. All those are key targets of the Executive and of DEL in particular.

Mr Douglas: I thank the Member for giving way. He mentioned ESF. All research shows that the early years programme is a valuable programme that makes a major impact. Does he agree that it will be disastrous for those groups across Northern Ireland if that fund finishes in August?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Anderson: I thank the Member for that intervention. I certainly agree that that would be a devastating blow for those groups, the children and their families. It would be a great loss to them and their communities going forward if that funding was to cease.

We must maximise the ESF's potential and not end up, as we have done, in a spider's web of bureaucratic confusion. Confidence in the integrity of the ESF has been damaged and must be repaired. I know that the process is now complete, but the Employment Minister and his officials must engage in an assessment of what went wrong so that lessons can and should be learned, we can get back on track and everyone, including the Minister for Employment and Learning, as well as other Ministers and Departments, works and supports each other in ensuring that community and voluntary groups do not suffer any loss or can minimise the loss of funding.

Mr A Maginness: I think that the motion is very balanced. Mr Swann and his colleagues are attempting to create room for manoeuvre in the Executive rather than allocating blame and, as it were, over-criticising individual Ministers for their decisions. They are also highlighting the ambiguity surrounding the European social fund, which has had a very negative effect on many community and voluntary organisations in relation to staff reductions and, indeed, their operations. It is an attempt to ask the Executive to bring about a more coordinated approach to funding and the disproportionate impact that those cuts are having on the community and voluntary sector. The arts sector, for example, accounts for 0.6% of the overall Budget, yet we see the devastating and disproportionate impact that the cuts have had on arts organisations across Northern Ireland. That cannot be right.

I would prefer to concentrate on the impact that the cuts have had on women's centres throughout Northern Ireland. The Training for Women Network (TWN) is one of Northern Ireland's largest networks promoting women's training and development. Almost half of the applications to the European social fund by

those organisations were rejected at the first phase of the process: 98% of women's sector funding applications were rejected at the very first stage of the process. That translated into a loss of 35 full-time jobs, 100 part-time jobs and over 2,400 training places. That is very disturbing, and it could lead to the total wipeout of the training and education services provided by the women's sector. That is not just one hit. Add that to the Education Minister's cuts to the vital early years — colleagues mentioned those — and the disproportionate detrimental effect on women is exacerbated.

The Minister for Social Development will be relieved to know that I am seeking clarification from the Minister for Employment and Learning and asking him to explain how his attempts to create a level playing field have benefited the private sector. Many of the private companies that were successful in securing funding have contacted TWN's partners to recruit participants. Imagine that. The Minister needs to explain how those groups were awarded funding without demonstrating that they could reach those groups. The Minister should also address the issue of formal freedom of information requests being ignored by the managing authority. The Minister really has to take that into account.

I take some of the points that Mr Wilson made, although he made them in a very adversarial manner. We do need an overall rain check on different Departments. It is not all down to budget cuts.

Ms Lo: Will the Member give way?

Mr A Maginness: Yes, indeed.

Ms Lo: Does the Member accept that that is not a funding cut? It is an EU programme with an open and competitive process.

Mr A Maginness: I accept that, and the way in which it has been managed has been criticised right across the Assembly today. The weight of criticism is such that I think that the Minister really needs to reconsider what has been happening with that.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for giving way. I paraphrase your comments and Mr Wilson's comments about all Executive Ministers having a more collaborative approach to community and voluntary sector funding and looking at the outcome of that so that we have a more holistic approach to supporting those projects that do sterling work in areas that are most in need.

Mr A Maginness: Indeed, and I accept that point. To be fair to Mr Swann and his colleagues, the motion states:

"the Executive to act in a coordinated manner to ensure that the sector and its organisations receive the required level of support and funding allocations."

It is a balanced motion that is fair to all Departments and to the Executive, but it asks the Executive to look at the issue again.

The TWN has also experienced delays in receiving funding to the sum of £400,000, which has been owed since March 2014. This is the third delay of the ESF because of the Department's audit process, and it has had a detrimental knock-on effect on funded projects. Small organisations that have had no money for a number of months have been put into a desperate situation. They are struggling to pay inland revenue and pension payments, and, consequently, face fines and overdraft costs that DEL does not cover. These organisations do vital work and projects cannot sustain without this funding. This is why I support calls for an emergency fund to be set up and put in place to allow a six-month extension —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is almost up.

Mr A Maginness: — to allow these projects to finish what they started. Without staff in place, DEL would have to hand back up to £6 million of EU funding. There is a risk here of a cost to government and a very real human cost.

Mr Buchanan: I apologise for not being here for the earlier part of the debate. I was caught up in another event. I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. The community and voluntary sector across Northern Ireland is the lifeblood of the Province. Those organisations play a strategic role in their respective communities, yet it is so easy for Departments to cut and hack at their funding without due care and consideration, and without thinking through the implications for the organisations and the people who use them.

The community and voluntary sector, through a small amount of funding, is able to provide an invaluable service for those in most need, especially in isolated rural areas. We are all well aware that Departments have suffered funding cuts and that they have to live within their budgets. Nobody is denying that. However, it appears that the community and voluntary sector is the easy target. They are the people being targeted by Departments. I

believe that Ministers could look within their own Department to see whether funding could be cut from other areas without having the same knock-on effect, but it appears that some Ministers and Departments are prepared to take the easy option and cut where it will hurt the most.

Of course, there is an added problem here. We are being fined £2 million weekly because Sinn Féin failed to honour its commitment to the Stormont House Agreement and sign up to welfare reform. That situation costs the Executive £2 million a week, friend. It costs £2 million a week — maybe we should say it again so that Sinn Féin gets to understand how much its failure to honour its commitment is costing the Executive. Sinn Féin, of course, is using this as a smokescreen in a sense. It is saying that it will not sign up because it is protecting the most vulnerable. Friend, who is being affected today by the community and voluntary sector cuts? It is the most vulnerable in society.

I want to focus very briefly on three areas that I have been lobbied on. One is early years. It takes £2 million to run early years. Of course, that £2 million cut is having a serious effect on early years and the services provided for young and preschool children. That cut came about without prior notification, engagement or consultation by the Department. What effect will it have? It will mean the loss of a local service in 153 communities in the most disadvantaged parts of Northern Ireland; a loss of 177 jobs, mainly among women and focused in areas of disadvantage; a loss of 2,500 early childhood places that were directly benefiting from the fund, including places for the most vulnerable children, and so on and so forth.

A Minister can build a school for 15 Irish language pupils at a cost of millions of pounds while taking £2 million from early years, where it would have the most benefit for our children, and, of course, the most benefit for education as they move forward. Let us remember that the early years service picks up on autistic disorders, speech and language therapy and all of that, which, in turn, saves the Department money in the longer term.

1.15 pm

We also have the issue of £60 million being cut from transport. What is that doing? It is affecting Easilink, especially in west Tyrone, where, again, the most vulnerable in society are being affected. Some £190,000 has been taken from the Easilink service in west Tyrone. The elderly are being affected, as are the

disabled and those with learning difficulties as the transport services that take them to the places they need to go are being cut.

The ESF funding —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is now up.

Mr Buchanan: — has been mentioned. The Minister for Employment and Learning needs to take a close look at that issue.

Mr Agnew: Having worked in the community and voluntary sector, specifically on homelessness, I am keenly aware of the services that are provided and the efficiency of those services. When you bring in the help of volunteers, you can stretch resources that bit further. Undoubtedly, the cuts are counter-strategic. Many Members who have spoken made the point about early years provision, and I echo that.

I am glad that a bit of tension was created in the debate. I do not agree with some of the comments that Sammy Wilson made, but I certainly agree that there is a political debate to be had. This debate ran the risk of turning into, "Good things are good and bad things are bad. The community sector is good and the cuts to it are bad." The reality is that the cuts are the result of political choices that are being made by the governing parties in Northern Ireland. Yes, we have to face the reality of Tory cuts, but there is also the reality of the self-implemented cuts that are being made by the Northern Ireland Government.

We often hear parties here boasting that they have kept rates down and that this is a low-tax economy. When you make that boast, you have to recognise that you also boast that you are happy to starve services of resources, to implement cuts, and to give tax breaks, often to those who can afford to pay more and to the wealthiest in our society. When you do that, you are saying that you are happy to accept cuts that will impact on the community and voluntary services that the most vulnerable in our community rely on.

The most stark example is the consensus across the five parties of the Northern Ireland Government on the implementation of further cuts through the reduction in corporation tax. Everyone who supports that policy and says that it will be good for our economy should go to each of the community and voluntary sector bodies that will, again, be the most vulnerable to those cuts because, as has been pointed out, they are seen as the easy target. They should

go to those sectors and say, "Here is why £300 million-plus of extra cuts per year is a good idea. Here is why the loss of your services is acceptable so that we can implement a massive tax break for big business. Here is why, despite the fact that we trumpet being the most successful region of the UK in bringing in foreign direct investment, our income gap with the rest of the UK is increasing and we are in a worse position than other UK regions."

I will give way to Mr Wilson.

Mr Wilson: I know that the —

Mr Speaker: Before you do that, we are running out of time, and I have to go to the Minister at 1.20 pm. It is your decision whether you want to give way.

Mr Agnew: I will give way, Mr Speaker.

Mr Wilson: I will be brief. Does the Member accept that these reductions are nothing to do with the introduction of corporation tax, which is at least three years down the line? To argue that they are a consequence of the devolution of corporation tax is totally false.

Mr Agnew: My argument is that further cuts will have to be made if we reduce corporation tax to the level that is proposed and that the community and voluntary sector will be most at risk. The decision to freeze rates, the decision to cut air passenger duty and the decision not to introduce water charges are all political decisions that have consequences. We had a 100% cut to our Budget. We did not seek in any way to raise revenue with the powers that we have. I agree that austerity is the number one cause of the problems we are facing, but the reality is that the Northern Ireland Government have chosen to add further austerity through these tax freezes, tax breaks and funding cuts.

As has been pointed out, the community and voluntary sector is not looking for special dispensation, but what has been clear, and what has been echoed throughout this debate, is that there has not been an evaluation-based approach. We have not cut the services that were performing least well; we have cut the services that were easier to cut. We have to produce a new Budget. We have had emergency Budget after emergency Budget through the funding rounds and the one-year Budget. We need a long-term Budget that sets out a strategic vision, and, where cuts have to be made when they are not self-imposed, they

should be based on evaluation and not on top-slicing.

Mr Storey: I thank the Members for tabling the motion. I listened with interest to all the contributions, and I want to set out a number of issues that are, for me, key as I respond to the debate. In doing so, I want to set out my vision of the relationship between my Department and the voluntary and community sector; the approach that we had to the 2015-16 Budget round; the relationship between government in Northern Ireland and the community and voluntary sector; and, I think most importantly, how we might best move forward.

I take the point made by a number of contributors: that those who watch the debate today will not really be interested in the platitudes and words about commending everybody but in how we will address a very serious situation. We can look at many organisations, and reference has been made to issues in early years and with community transport. I know of issues from my constituency, with organisations like Can Can Recycling in Ballymoney and the Greenlight Gateway project, and other matters around community transport. Another issue that has been raised with me in recent days, which is being pursued by the Education Minister, is that of the long-term future of the Youth Council and its voluntary activities. That raises serious concerns about the whole issue of volunteering, which is something that we all value and we all see the huge benefits to society that flow from it.

My response today will primarily draw on the experience of my Department during the 2015-16 Budget and the decision-making processes that we followed. It is also based on my responsibility as lead Minister for relationships between government and the voluntary and community sector. I am sure that you will understand that I am unable to respond and provide any information on allocation policies and processes followed by other Departments, but I will come back to that point as I continue, following on from some correspondence that we recently forwarded to OFMDFM.

As Minister for Social Development, I fully recognise the significant contribution that the voluntary and community sector makes to civic society in Northern Ireland. I want to see a strong, vibrant, enterprising and sustainable sector within the community. I think that that is also emerging out of these recent days, but that is also the aim and objective of many of the organisations in the community and voluntary sector. Where changes can be made and

where effective collaboration can be brought forward, I believe that the voluntary and community sector has proved in the past, and will continue to prove in the future, that it is more than capable of being able to address that issue. However, when it is faced with a funding crisis, it makes it much more difficult for the sector to be able to progress other issues that it would like to.

I remain committed, as does my Department, to working closely with the sector as it provides support to the most vulnerable in society and ensures continued access to much-needed services.

I welcome the representatives of NICVA in the Public Gallery. They know that this is something that I have said to them and to many organisations that I have met as a Member and since becoming Minister. There is a challenge for the Executive: if the organisations that are in real financial difficulties go out of existence, who picks up the services that were delivered by those organisations?

I spent some time in Ballycastle in my constituency just last week and saw first-hand the work of the Greenlight Gateway project. As Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning, the proposer of the motion will know about that project. The reality is that the cost of the service that will now have to be picked up by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and others is more than what is currently being provided for by that organisation. That raises serious issues for us all when we talk about prudence and best value for money.

Mr F McCann: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Storey: Yes, I will.

Mr F McCann: You highlighted one of the big problems that has been there for many years: how we look at the worth of the community and voluntary sector and about the attitude that prevails in many Departments. We have to have that debate because many of us who have been involved in the community sector understand and appreciate the wealth of talent and work that goes on in communities. However, that is lost on Departments when they look at that type of work and, with the stroke of a pen, wipe away years of work in helping people in communities.

Mr Storey: That is the case. I wish, however, that when Ministers make those decisions they would always be consistent in the outworking of

the results of their decisions. The Hansard report of this debate will be made available to my ministerial colleagues. As I will explain in a moment or two, I am committed to ensuring that the Executive give due diligence and attention to the issue.

During my time in office I have met voluntary and community sector representatives regularly to discuss the implications of Budget cuts to the sector. I heard their concerns first-hand when I attended the February joint forum meeting between government and the voluntary and community sector. It would be untrue to maintain a position that the strain on public finances in 2015-16 has not had a significant impact on the financial relationships between government and the sector. With that in mind, I instructed my officials to ensure that, where possible, during the Budget allocation process, resource allocations across the Department would be prioritised, transparent, accountable and evidence-based. The outworking of this has meant that, in determining the 2015-16 Budget allocation, my Department sought to minimise the impact on the wider voluntary and community sector by prioritising, as far as possible, funding to support the sustainability of the sector and to maintain support for key services such as generalist advice services, neighbourhood renewal, Supporting People, volunteering and childcare.

Before I turn to the issue of relationships between government and the voluntary and community sector, I want to reiterate the process that I use in my Department. For the first time, I have come to look at the issue of how a Minister deals with the point that was made by my colleague, Sammy Wilson. We are enveloped by a considerable number of officials who come to us, day and daily, with a raft of issues, and it would be very easy to take the normal trend of those briefings. However, I ensured that we not only looked at my budget priorities and at all the issues of accountability, but, looking at some of the budget streams in particular, we ensured that we cross-referenced them with other offices in the Department to ensure that we had done the best possible task that we could. We were in very difficult circumstances where we made decisions knowing that we had lost a considerable amount of our starting point in the allocation of our budget in the first place.

1.30 pm

Coming back to the issue of relationships between the Government and the voluntary and community sector, I strongly believe that the Government are working with the voluntary and

community sector in partnership. We will strengthen that relationship as we move forward on managing these issues.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for giving way. In relation to that relationship between the community and voluntary sector and the Government here, would the Minister consider lobbying his Executive colleagues, particularly in Finance and Personnel and Enterprise, Trade and Investment, on the introduction of the Social Value Act into the North of Ireland?

Mr Storey: That has been discussed along with a number of issues. I am going to come on to the discussions I have been engaged in with my ministerial colleagues in the Executive in a minute.

I am conscious of time, but I want to come to the issue of the concordat. It has been referred to, and I just want to make sure that Members know what it is. Here we have a copy of it. We can let everybody see that all Ministers signed up to a process and a concordat. I consider that the concordat between the Northern Ireland Government and the voluntary and community sector is the formal shared vision of the partnership and reflects the commitment to work in partnership in building a participative, peaceful, equitable and inclusive community. However, I think that all Ministers and Departments would do well to revisit the concordat to see how they have engaged in its delivery.

The concordat very clearly and transparently lays the foundation for partnership working. The joint forum, with membership drawn from the voluntary and community sector and the public sector, provides structured and managed opportunities for increased collaborative working and joined-up action in areas of mutual interest such as outcomes-focused funding, addressing excessive bureaucracy, procurement, policy development and development of best practice. Surely, those are the areas that organisations want us to be engaged in and the discussions they want us to be involved in. As we have said, all Departments, including my own, are signatories to the concordat. I feel confident that the approach followed by my Department in the 2015-16 Budget allocation process was consistent with the values and principles contained in the concordat.

From the motion, and the debate that has taken place on it, I believe that there is a clear recognition of the need for closer collaboration in our partnership working. We need to ensure

that unintended consequences resulting from our decision-making processes are minimised. My colleague Sammy Wilson referred to the impact we have seen in relation to DRD and community transport, for example. We have all been lobbied on that issue because of the serious consequences it has across a whole raft of other elements of government services, particularly in rural communities.

I want to bring the House up to date in relation to the fact that the joint forum held a single-issue meeting on Friday past that focused on the cuts to the sector. To ensure that my Department is clearly sighted on the issues being raised by the sector representatives, I asked senior officials from the Department to attend and hear at first hand the detail being raised. The concordat will be successful with real commitment across the public and voluntary and community sectors. I would like to underline the importance of Departments complying with the values and principles.

Let me move on to the discussions with the First Minister and deputy First Minister. After recent discussions with voluntary and community representatives, I wrote to OFMDFM to offer my Department's assistance to the overview being undertaken by OFMDFM junior Ministers on budget decisions across Departments.

Mr Beggs: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Storey: Yes.

Mr Beggs: Would the Minister accept that the late decision-making process that has pertained in Northern Ireland for a number of years particularly, and adversely, affects the community and voluntary sector and that that sector is there for last-minute savings and that its value is not being regarded appropriately?

Mr Storey: We always have this issue in relation to budgets and the mechanisms that we use. It has been discussed in the House a number of times. We have embarked on the overview. Given that NICVA raised the issue with OFMDFM and it was raised at the Executive, I subsequently met representatives from NICVA, and I will continue to have that engagement with OFMDFM junior Ministers. All those issues need to be looked at.

I also want to raise the issue that I raised without prejudice in correspondence with OFMDFM: the possibility of developing some form of transition assistance for the voluntary and community sector as it adapts to

transformed funding arrangements. Here is where we have to be honest. It has been raised for different reasons. It was interesting that one Member opposite did not want to take any interventions; that was because it was clearly an attack on the Government at Westminster and the cuts that are going to come. There will be reduced moneys in the future. We have to find a way to manage that.

Mr Speaker: Thank you.

Mr Storey: That is why, as Minister for Social Development with responsibility for welfare reform, I find it difficult to stand in front of this desk today —

Mr Speaker: Thank you, Minister.

Mr Storey: — and talk about vulnerable communities when I realise that, because people have not fulfilled —

Mr Speaker: I call Roy Beggs —

Mr Storey: — the Stormont House Agreement —

Mr Speaker: — to conclude and wind up.

Mr Storey: — we are in a far bigger financial crisis.

Mr Speaker: Another Member has the Floor.

Mr Beggs: I declare my involvement and interest in a number of groups: I am chair of the Carrickfergus children and young people's locality group; I am a committee member of Horizon Sure Start; I am a Boys' Brigade officer; I am treasurer of Carrickfergus community drugs and alcohol advisory group; and I am on the Carrickfergus road safety committee. Those of us who are aware of things on the ground learn lessons and get to see things from different sides, so let me very clearly put it on record that I value greatly the role of the voluntary and community sector. Frequently, it reaches vulnerable individuals and gets solutions that the statutory sector cannot. We all have to recognise that. It also often carries out preventative work that, all too often, is not valued to the degree and extent that it should be. I think that virtually all Members have recognised the important role that the community and voluntary sector plays, but financial outcomes in the process have not been delivered.

It is important that we recognise that, for volunteers to work, there needs to be a degree of support. It may be simply by ensuring that they have the necessary training so that they can carry out their contribution in a safe and protected manner. It may be simply by ensuring that there is appropriate insurance cover, because, sometimes, without it, volunteers cannot work, because they put themselves and their group at risk. It is important that that little bit of seed money is looked at very carefully to ensure that it is provided.

When I look at my constituency in recent times, I am very encouraged by the work of Ledcom in its community development activity in the Craigy Hill area and in its educational outreach in a number of areas in Larne and Carrickfergus that was successfully reaching individuals whom, previously, the statutory organisations, including the further education colleges, failed to reach. Without the involvement of the community and voluntary sector, government objectives were not achievable. I think, too, of how the women's forum in Carrick has played a very constructive role working with Women's Aid to give confidence back to individuals who may have suffered so that they can start to attend education courses. Again, however, funding has been cut. What for the future? I do not know. Frequently, the burden will fall on statutory agencies that are already overstretched.

My colleague Robin Swann highlighted the apparent lack of appreciation by the Executive of the community and voluntary sector. At the moment, the community and voluntary sector certainly feels that the outcomes of the budgetary process mean that its work is not being valued. Although I welcome the Minister saying that the Department will take a fresh look at this, the current status is that the work of the community and voluntary sector has not been valued to the extent that it should be.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beggs: Yes.

Mr Storey: Here is the point that I have found difficult when listening to the debate: it seemed as though it is an issue for everybody, as long as it was not their Minister's issue. Is the Member saying that every Member, irrespective of party affiliation, should collectively say that every Minister has to sign up to and deliver on the concordat and ensure that we do something across the piece? Is that what the Member is saying? I know that the Member who proposed

the motion tried to ensure that that was the case, but let us have clarity around the issue.

Mr Beggs: I have no difficulty with that. All Ministers need to look at how funding has been allocated and value the important work that the community and voluntary sector carries out.

One thing jumped out at me when I learned more about what happened with NIACRO and European social funding. We have DEL bringing an abrupt end to the service that was provided. Meanwhile, the justice system — like DEL, it has an Alliance Minister — did not know how to react and suddenly pick up the pieces. Where was the transition? Where was the planning? Where was the recognition of the valuable work that was being carried out to help resettle offenders, to lessen the likelihood of reoffending and to lessen the likelihood of them coming back into the justice system and bringing about pain in our community, which will potentially suffer criminal activity should those people not be reincorporated into society? There are also the additional costs to the justice system, the courts and the prisons. Therefore, it is vital that such gaps do not happen. We need to look carefully at our processes to ensure that that does not happen again.

It has also been highlighted by the community and voluntary sector that some of the processes that have been put in will work against it, with it having to work at risk. Of course, they do not have the financial backing to work at risk, and that potentially excludes much of the good work that has happened in the past. They do not have a pool of funding to set aside should they not be able to achieve all the objectives that may be set for them by Departments. That may, of course, be tackled by the private sector, but, again, will the private sector be able to attract the necessary people to courses to achieve their objectives? I suggest that the community sector is best placed to reach many of the vulnerable members of our community.

Sammy Wilson blamed everything on welfare reform. I think he said that the cut to the arts budget was equivalent to a day and a half of welfare reform fines and the cut to early years funding was equivalent to two days of welfare reform fines. That is a viable comparison. We have to accept that choices are being made.

I am astounded at the approach taken by Bronwyn McGahan, who is not in the Chamber. In her speech, she said that this was all the Tories' fault. We are a devolved Assembly. We have to take decisions based on the hand that is given to us, and we must take decisions to try

to better our community. Frankly, why are you involved in politics if you are going to blame somebody else for everything? We have to be responsible for ourselves, and we have to operate within our Budget.

Steven Agnew said that he wished to raise taxes to raise additional money to fill some of the voids. At least that is a mechanism that would work. Again, there are choices to be made there, but I wonder whether, in the long term, some of them could end up adversely affecting more people, because, if we do not ensure that we have more people working and contributing, there are huge risks of there being even more vulnerable people in our community.

Mr Agnew: I thank the Member for giving way and for his comments on my contribution. The point that I make is that we can raise taxes only if they are progressive; that is, if they fall heaviest on those who can afford them, not on the most vulnerable. Otherwise — the Member is right — they would be counterproductive to what we are trying to achieve.

Mr Beggs: Yes. It was also said during the debate that we could not magic money. That is very true. We have our Budget, and we have to live with it or raise additional moneys in whatever manner we wish to agree on.

1.45 pm

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Member for giving way. Given his last comments, will he put forward suggestions about where additional money can come from to meet some of the gaps that our community and voluntary sector is suffering?

Mr Beggs: Like the Member, I have been encouraging welfare reform to be moved along. That would remove some of the difficulties of huge and mounting fines, which will increase. I also recognise that huge administrative burdens will ultimately arrive when the old computer system eventually crashes. That is one very easy way of dealing with it.

It is important that we try to improve the choices that we have. I welcome the Minister's suggestion that it is important to work in partnership with the community and voluntary sector and the fact that he quoted the concordat. However, Minister, I again highlight that that is not what the community and voluntary sector feels at this time.

I suggest that our Budget process results in very late decision-making with no real discussion about the knock-on effects of a draft

Budget and how it will pan out on the ground, and it leaves little room to readjust, manoeuvre and change. Making decisions very late gives organisations no notice of change. We have no transition funds. I certainly welcome the suggestion that there should be a transition fund of some sort to try to stop that happening in the future. That would be welcome. It is important that we look at our process to ensure that the community and voluntary sector's contribution is recognised. I suspect that civil servants do not currently recognise the true value and the cross-cutting nature of much of the work that the sector does in the budgetary process and therefore one Department can easily cut funding to the community and voluntary sector at the expense of many others.

Mr Speaker: Thank you.

Mr Beggs: I ask you to support the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the important role of the community and voluntary sector across Northern Ireland in providing effective, efficient and value for money front-line services; accepts that, as a consequence of the 2015-16 Budget, decisions are being made by individual Executive Departments with no consideration of the impact on these services or the effect that they will have on the vulnerable in society; further notes that the ambiguity surrounding the European social fund has also forced many organisations to reduce their staff and their operations; and calls on the Executive to act in a coordinated manner to ensure that the sector and its organisations receive the required level of support and funding allocations.

Psychoactive Substances

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. One amendment has been selected and is published on the Marshalled List. The proposer will have 10 minutes to propose the amendment and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members called to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Easton: I beg to move

That this Assembly expresses its concern at the impact of legal highs and in particular at the number of resulting deaths; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to continue his work with the Home Office to ensure the introduction of new legislation across the United Kingdom to ban new psychoactive substances.

The use of legal highs is a growing problem in drug misuse. Officially known as new psychoactive substances, legal highs are synthetic drugs that are self-administered and produce an altered state of mind. They are often created in laboratories in Asia and sold to European markets before authorities have time to ban them. Legal highs can be bought online and in shops known as head shops. The online marketplace adds further complexity, because these drugs can be more accessible to younger people and can be promoted through social networking sites.

Legal highs have become adopted as recreational party drugs, and they mimic the effects of drugs such as cocaine and Ecstasy. However, legal highs are not controlled in Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 and are therefore legal to possess. Legal high substances can be bought lawfully by anyone over the age of 18. However, the Public Health Agency (PHA) in Northern Ireland suggests that professionals working in the area of drugs report that many young people, including those of post-primary age, are taking legal highs. The number of UK deaths linked to so-called legal highs or new psychoactive substances has risen in recent years from 10 in 2009 to at least 68 in 2012. That number is increasing. The latest death, in Newtownards in April, was that of Adam Owens, a young person who came from my constituency.

The term "legal highs" is misleading and instils a perception that these substances are safe and legal to sell for human consumption. That may not always be the case. These new substances are not yet controlled, because there has not been enough research into the substances they contain and how safe they are.

Legal highs are considered illegal to sell for human consumption under the Medicines Act 1968, but, in order for sellers to get around that, products are cleverly packaged as bath salts, incense, pond cleaner or plant food, with a warning label: "Not for human consumption". That enables producers to subvert the law and avoid sanctions from the Medicine and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency. Often, no ingredients will be listed on the product packaging. They come in various pill and powder forms. Some legal highs may also contain ingredients that are illegal to possess, such as class B drugs like amphetamines. Side effects include reduced inhibitions, drowsiness, paranoid states, coma, seizures and strokes. Legal highs can even cause death, and the effects can be exacerbated by alcohol or other drugs. Part of the difficulty is that the chemicals that they contain have, in most cases, never been used in drugs for human consumption before, so research on their composition is limited, and the substances have not been tested to show that they are safe. In turn, users can never be certain what they are taking or what the effects might be.

The sheer volume of and speed at which new legal highs are appearing on the market makes the policing of those substances particularly challenging for law enforcement authorities and policymakers alike. In addition to the classification of drugs listed above, a further new classification called temporary class drugs banning orders is in place to tackle legal highs. Furthermore, the Department of Justice, the Police Service of Northern Ireland and the Public Health Agency have introduced an informal early warning system known as the drug and alcohol monitoring and information system (DAMIS), which seeks to identify new substances or drug trends at an early stage and provide information and advice to key stakeholders. The Public Health Agency drug and alcohol monitoring and information system has been receiving reports of people across Northern Ireland experiencing unpleasant and potentially dangerous side effects after smoking synthetic cannabinoids, with a number of users having been hospitalised. The Public Health Agency is using its early warning system to raise awareness of the risk of specific groups of new emerging substances and is urging those who feel unwell after taking those drugs to seek

medical help urgently. Currently, 107 different synthetic cannabinoids have been identified across Europe, and potency is hugely variable. They are often a lot stronger than cannabis and may even have completely different effects.

In Northern Ireland, the issue of legal highs has received much media attention. However, there is no official recorded information, including information on hospital admissions, about the use or prevalence of legal highs at a local level. Nevertheless, the Public Health Agency suggests that professionals who are working in the area of drugs and alcohol in the community report that many young people, including those from post-primary age, are taking legal highs. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety also stated in 2012 that, given the number of issues, it is difficult to get a clear picture of the level of misuse. A number of information sources show their level of impact, but that may underestimate the overall scale of the problem.

In 2013, the Home Office appointed an expert panel to consider how best to tackle new psychoactive substances (NPS). In the Government's written ministerial statement at that time, it was made clear that they were prepared to enhance the UK-wide legislation framework to ensure that their law enforcement agencies had the best available powers, sending out the clearest possible message that trade in those substances was reckless and that the substances are dangerous and can be fatal. The Government have been proactive in tackling those new drugs over the last few years. Indeed, the UK has a range of approaches that are recognised as world leaders. The UK has already banned 350 substances and been quicker to respond to the challenges than many other countries. It has continued its commitment to the forensic early response system, which enables it to identify new substances swiftly. That has led to successive communication campaigns to raise awareness of the risks of so-called legal highs among young people; work with law enforcement agencies on a concrete programme of action; and the international effort to tackle the availability of those new drugs. Front-line services have also made an important contribution by raising awareness of the problems of NPS and by rapidly developing clinical and other responses to them.

The Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 has remained the cornerstone of the response to the most harmful drugs, where the evidence of prevalence and harms or potential harms are justified by that level of control. I, therefore, urge the Minister to continue his work with the

Home Office to ensure that new legislation is introduced across the UK to counteract and ban these substances as soon as possible.

Finally, there is an amendment on the Floor, and although I am willing to accept that, I must say that it takes away from the motion, because we need new legislation. However, I am willing to accept what you have put down, because the issue is far too important to be argued or fought about by anyone in the House.

Mr Speaker: As Question Time begins at 2.00 pm, I suggest that the House take its ease until then. The debate will continue after Question Time, when the next Member to speak will be Mr Fearghal McKinney, who will move the amendment.

The debate stood suspended.

2.00 pm

(Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Newton] in the Chair)

Oral Answers to Questions

Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I inform the Chamber that questions 1, 6, 12 and 15 have been withdrawn.

Ambulance Service: Personnel

2. **Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, given the reliance on private ambulance services, whether he plans to increase the number of Northern Ireland Ambulance Service personnel. (AQO 8177/11-15)

Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) is not reliant on using private ambulance services. Private ambulance providers are used only in exceptional circumstances such as those that arose during the recent periods of industrial action on 13 March and from 27 April to 10 May. The use of private ambulance services on those occasions was under the NIAS resource escalation plan to support the Ambulance Service's resources. The private ambulance services were engaged primarily to deal with non-emergency calls in order to protect capacity for Northern Ireland Ambulance Service staff to be deployed in response to 999 calls.

Ms Sugden: Given the recent news reports of increased pressures on public service ambulances, has the Minister any plans to alleviate that and, if so, what are they?

Mr Hamilton: Issues that were highlighted by the recent industrial action have been dealt with, and I am confident that the escalation plans that are in place in the trusts are appropriate to deal with that. At the minute, there are roughly 94 vacancies in the Ambulance Service, and many of those posts have been for emergency medical technicians. Around 90 of those positions have been offered to ambulance care attendants. I hope that the filling of those vacancies could help to alleviate some of the pressures that manifested themselves during the recent industrial action

but which can also be seen in intervening periods when there is pressure on existing resources. Many constituents of mine and many constituents of other Members will have reported difficulties with the slowness, sometimes, of response times in the Ambulance Service. I hope that moving to fill those vacancies might help to address some of those pressures.

Mr G Robinson: Will the Minister state how the number of paramedics working in the health service in Northern Ireland has changed over recent years?

Mr Hamilton: If you go back to the beginning of the current Assembly term — roughly the end of March 2011 — the number of paramedics employed in the Ambulance Service in Northern Ireland was 379. If you fast-forward to March 2015, that number has risen. Even though I pointed out to Ms Sugden the vacancies that exist, which we are trying to fill, there are currently 415 paramedics, and that includes 80 rapid-response vehicle paramedics. In that four-year period between 2011 and 2015, there has been a 9.4% increase in the number of paramedics, and that has to be warmly welcomed. I appreciate that, even with that additional complement, there are still pressures on the service and that there can still be difficulties, but it is testimony to the work of my predecessors in post that, even at a time when resources have been under severe pressure, as we all know, investments have been made in the front line. The Ambulance Service is a front-line service, and our paramedics and our care attendants are incredibly important to the overall service, so a near 10% increase in the number of Northern Ireland Ambulance Service paramedics over that period of time is testimony to the commitment that we have made to the front line in that period.

Mr Dallat: I preface my question by paying tribute to the Ambulance Service, certainly in the northern and western areas. Does the Minister agree with me that, when someone makes that 999 call, they expect a response?

Given that there are 94 vacancies, would the Minister agree that that in itself is an emergency?

Mr Hamilton: I agree. I join with Mr Dallat in paying tribute to the work that staff in the Ambulance Service do on behalf of us all; it was remiss of me not to do so earlier. Our citizens should expect the highest standard of service from them as from all in the health and social care sector.

There are issues with response times that I have been familiarising myself with, as you can imagine, over the last number of days. Unfortunately, sometimes some targets, particularly the eight-minute response time for life-threatening calls, or category A calls as they are called, are not being met. That is in spite of the investment that I outlined to Mr Robinson to increase the number of paramedics.

We all appreciate the range of pressures. Going back to the original question asked by Ms Sugden, we are, thankfully, able to use private and charitable providers, such as St John Ambulance, the Order of Malta and the Red Cross, to alleviate some of the pressure so that Ambulance Service staff can deal with life-threatening calls and emergency situations, so that when somebody, unfortunately, has to make the call, they are getting responded to appropriately and in the appropriate time. We know that, when they do get responded to, they get the best of care.

Mr Allister: In terms of the adequacy of ambulance provision, would the Minister undertake to look again at the provision of air ambulance services in light of the events on Saturday at the North West 200, where a spectator had to be airlifted to hospital? Can he comment on the fact that, although the severe trauma unit is at the Royal Victoria Hospital, there is no facility to land a helicopter at that hospital, adding to the delay in transporting severely injured personnel?

Mr Hamilton: The Member is right to raise the incident at the weekend. It again highlights the issue of air ambulance provision in Northern Ireland. We were all shocked by the severity of the incident at the North West 200. Pictures in the press today showed how serious it was. We pay tribute to the staff who responded, and obviously our thoughts are with those still in hospital who are being cared for. We wish them a speedy recovery.

The Health and Social Care Board submitted a report to my Department on the feasibility and appropriateness of establishing a dedicated helicopter emergency medical service in Northern Ireland. I am awaiting the report of the emergency aeromedical support services group that was established by the Republic of Ireland's Department of Health to consider the provision of a dedicated service in that jurisdiction. I imagine that will include recommendations in relation to the potential for the expansion of the geographical reach of that service to include the whole of the island. When the report is received, I will consider those recommendations in conjunction with the

Health and Social Care Board study before making a final decision on the matter.

Mr Allister is also right to point out one of the practical difficulties in the provision of air ambulances. I do not think anybody would dispute that, where we had appropriate resources, it would be a good thing to do on our own or with our neighbours to the south. However, that would require investment in not just a helicopter but staff, maintenance, upkeep and infrastructure changes to ensure there is an appropriate place to land a helicopter. That is one reason why, at this stage, even if we had an air ambulance, it would not necessarily be working to its optimum performance.

There are a lot of points to consider. It is on the agenda, and the events of the weekend highlight it all the more.

Mr Hussey: Like Mr Dallat, I pay tribute to the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service. I had the misfortune of having to travel recently in an ambulance with my late mother to the South West Acute Hospital. The paramedics who dealt with my mother were excellent.

Does the Minister know how much compulsory overtime ambulance drivers and paramedics have to undertake because of the 98 paramedic vacancies, or whatever number it is?

Mr Hamilton: I don't is the simple answer, but I am happy to provide that information to the Member in due course. It is worth pointing out that Ms Sugden's question was a useful one in that it highlighted the provision being provided by others in support of the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service. That support is primarily for non-emergency situations where patients are moved from hospital back to their home or from their home to hospital for appointments. It is worth noting the work being done on our behalf by other providers, and I hope that there is an acceptance around the House that it is a good thing that we are able to call upon that resource as appropriate.

I do not have the specifics on the amount of overtime being paid, but I am happy to provide that information to the Member in due course.

June Monitoring Round: HSSPS Bids

3. **Mrs Overend** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline his planned bids for the June monitoring round. (AQO 8178/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: The final budget for 2015-16 is exceptionally challenging for my Department. Indeed, even after delivering substantial savings of almost £160 million, some £30 million to £40 million of unfunded pressures remain to be addressed. In addition, there is no funding to invest in a range of new service developments.

I am also fully aware of the difficulties of the overall Northern Ireland financial position and the need to urgently get a resolution to the welfare reform issue. In such a constrained financial context, my Department will seek additional funding from the Executive through the in-year monitoring processes to avoid service consequences and provide additional services and treatments for patients.

I assure Members that, if successful, additional income from June monitoring would enable me to address a range of critical front-line service pressures in elective care, mental health, learning disability, specialist drugs, children's services, Transforming Your Care, public health and unscheduled care.

The June monitoring bids are being developed for my consideration and, in line with normal practice, will be discussed with the Health Committee prior to final submission.

Mrs Overend: I congratulate the Minister on his new position. He will know more than most about the uncertainty surrounding the monitoring round. Can he detail the most recent estimated funding pressure for his Department this year? In particular, what service in what trust is he most concerned for?

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for her congratulations. I hope that in roughly a year's time she is still able to stand on her feet in this House and congratulate me.

Mrs Overend: So do I. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Hamilton: I think most people do.

As I hope I outlined in my response to the first question, even before taking up this post I was well aware of the financial pressures that the Department of Health is facing. Even though I am very pleased and, I suppose, proud of the fact that, in my previous post, I was able to ensure that 3·4% uplift in departmental expenditure in the Health Department this year — £203 million or £204 million — that still left considerable pressures and the need to realise significant savings from the budget. We are committed to delivering, and we expect to

deliver, a further £160 million worth of savings through efficiencies throughout the health system this year.

However, there remain roughly £30 million to £40 million worth of unfunded pressures in the system. Those pressures will be spread right across the system and are being faced in various trusts and other services like the Public Health Agency and so forth that we are providing.

Those are the immediate pressures that the Department faces that we need to deal with in-year through a range of measures if that money is not found through the monitoring round process. We are all concerned with the situation and the stand-off on welfare reform, what will happen with the monitoring round process and whether it will be a monitoring round process where money can be distributed or whether the Executive will face further pressures on funding.

So, there are £30 million to £40 million of unfunded pressures, but that is before we get into service development. I am sure that everybody in the House will receive, as will I now that I am in this post, requests for service development, such as more spending on mental health, learning disabilities and elective care and so on and so forth. As things stand, I will not be able to fund those service developments because of the pressures that still exist in the budget.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Go raibh agat, a Príomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer. Given his previous comments on the budgetary spend in Health and the Chief Medical Officer's comments today in relation to a very clear need to radically review the system, what needs to change? Go raibh maith agat.

2.15 pm

Mr Hamilton: The Health budget, as the Member, and indeed the House, knows is by far the biggest that the Executive have. At £4·7 billion, it is close to half of the total Budget. It is a lot of money. Given the Member's position as Chair of the Committee, she will appreciate, probably more than most, that while, on the face of it, you would think that spending that amount of money would be sufficient to provide the highest standard of health and social care for a population of 1·8 million, we are facing a range of pressures around an ageing and growing population, the pressure of technological advances and the rise of chronic

illnesses, to name just three. We do need to "radically review", to use her term, or the term she has borrowed from the Chief Medical Officer, if we are to ensure that the investment that the Executive have given to the Health budget, which the House has voted to support down through the years, gets the highest standard, the highest safety and the highest quality of care.

I believe that we do need to make transformations in the way we deliver the services that our citizens require. There will be change, and sometimes that change will require difficult decisions. The Chief Medical Officer's comments, following on from Sir Liam Donaldson's report will, I hope, provoke some conversation around this issue. There has been reasonable consensus across the political spectrum on the need to reform, but perhaps not always on the detail of how that reform unfolds. I am pretty sure in my mind that, as we move forward and address the need to transform our health service and our social care system, we need to have an open and honest conversation, and we need to reach broad political consensus in this place if we are to make it work. It is no good just me coming forward with it. I can preach a mantra about the need for transformation all I want, but, if I am the only person doing it and it is not accepted by others, we will not go too far.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I remind the Minister of the two-minute rule.

Mr I McCrea: I join those who have congratulated the Minister on his new post. He has gone from calling for Departments to make efficiency savings to having to do so himself. In that vein, what efficiency savings has the Department managed to achieve in recent years to allow the Minister and his predecessors to invest in front-line services?

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for his congratulations, and I know for sure that, if I do step out of line, he will be one of the first who will tell me that I have done so. I thank him as well for reminding me. Most people move from a poacher to a gamekeeper role, but I think that I am more moving from a gamekeeper to poacher role in the change of office last week.

In my previous role, I was well aware of the savings that have been made across the health system over the last number of years. I can recall from various Budget debates that, when there was criticism of the health service and of inefficiencies in our system, I was always very keen to remind the House of the savings and

efficiencies that had been delivered over the last number of years. I think that they are often forgotten about: eaten bread is soon forgotten, of course.

I think that the numbers are quite impressive. Between the 2011-12 and 2013-14 financial years, nearly half a billion pounds, £490 million, of savings and efficiencies were realised across the health system. We anticipate that, in the last financial year, 2014-15, there will be roughly £170 million of additional savings. As I mentioned before, there was a commitment for the current financial year, 2015-16, to reach a target of £160 million of savings. That is roughly two thirds of a billion pounds already that has been saved, with an estimate of around £800 million by the end of this Assembly term. That is approximately double the savings that were achieved in the last Assembly term, and I think that it is an impressive record of driving efficiency through the system at a time when that system is under considerable pressures.

I want to ensure, as I am sure everybody in the House does, that the approximately £4.7 billion that we are investing in the health and social care system in Northern Ireland is providing people with the care they require and is not being spent unnecessarily on administration and other aspects of bureaucracy.

Mr McKinney: I too congratulate the Minister on his new role. Minister, considering that the Transforming Your Care plan was predominantly funded through monitoring rounds, can you update the House on its status in relation to upcoming bids? Can you also detail whether the Transforming Your Care plan remains your Department's core strategic plan in reforming the delivery of healthcare from institutional settings to the community?

Mr Hamilton: The short answer to the final question from the Member is yes: the principles of Transforming Your Care remain priorities for this Department. I am aware that, in his report, Sir Liam Donaldson recommended a timetabled implementation plan. As the Member pointed out in the first of his several questions, resourcing is a factor. I have heard the Member criticise TYC in this place before — sorry, he was against it before he was for it. He has more latterly been in support of it, his party having previously criticised TYC.

TYC envisaged an investment of £70 million and a shift left in service provision that would release savings to the value of £83 million. To date, around £26 million has been allocated to TYC initiatives. It is not that TYC is not moving

forward, even if that is the perception of some. For example, all 17 integrated care partnerships have agreed their action plans and submitted proposals for service changes. The primary care infrastructure is also starting to be put in place; Banbridge, Ballymena and Omagh are moving forward. Procurement processes are being taken forward for Newry and Lisburn. There is a lot of work being done. By the end of this financial year, we will, we anticipate, have driven a shift left of £45 million. It is moving forward, although perhaps more slowly than we would have liked because of resourcing pressures, which is why I will bid in the June monitoring round for funding for Transforming Your Care, so that we can continue to realise the efficiencies and, more importantly, the better standard of care that will result.

Heart Attacks

4. **Mr Douglas** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what progress has been made in providing access to life-saving treatments for people who have had a heart attack. (AQO 8179/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: Since September 2014, the primary percutaneous coronary intervention (PPCI) service for patients suffering the most severe form of heart attack has been provided to the entire Northern Ireland population from two centres, in the Royal Victoria Hospital and Altnagelvin Hospital. PPCI saves lives, reduces complications, speeds recovery and shortens the hospital stay. The service has benefited around 1,060 patients in Northern Ireland since its roll-out in September 2013. My Department has also invested in 10 cath labs at four sites in Northern Ireland provided by the Belfast, Southern and Western trusts. We have also developed a community resuscitation strategy to improve the survival rate for those who suffer an out-of-hospital cardiac arrest by increasing the availability of CPR training and the number of automated external defibrillators across Northern Ireland.

Mr Douglas: I thank the Minister for his answers thus far and also offer my best wishes to him in his new role. This scheme is obviously very successful and has been rolled out across Northern Ireland. Can he remind us of the numbers who benefit from the scheme?

Mr Hamilton: The Member is right to point out that this has been a great success for the people of Northern Ireland. As I said, cardiac catheterisation labs are of enormous benefit to patients who have had a heart attack, because they can save lives, reduce complications,

speed up recovery and significantly shorten hospital stays, to the extent that, whereas in the past somebody who had suffered a heart attack might have expected to be in hospital for a number of days or, indeed, weeks, they can now be out in just a few days.

Around 1,060 patients have benefited from this service since the roll-out in September 2013, and we should welcome the fact that this specialist service at the sites that I have outlined, and the emergency work being done in the Belfast trust area and in Altnagelvin as well, is proving so successful, justifying the faith that was put in this service and the investment that was made.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Can the Minister, either now or in writing, detail the life-saving treatments and services that will be available at the new local hospital in Omagh following the transfer of services from Tyrone County Hospital that is expected to take place early next year? Can he detail the treatments that will be available in an area where many people, through being in a rural setting, are very distant from an acute hospital?

Mr Hamilton: The Member is right in his prediction that I will have to provide the information in writing. He has been typically cheeky by slotting in a question about the West Tyrone constituency to a question tabled on the issue of coronary care. It is nonetheless an important question, and I will provide him with sufficient detail in writing.

Mrs Dobson: I also welcome the Minister to his new post. Can he provide an update on what discussions his Department has had about incorporating cardiopulmonary resuscitation training into education in post-primary schools? Does he support the British Heart Foundation as it rolls out its free training to schools?

Mr Hamilton: The Member will be aware of the publication, in July 2014, of the community resuscitation strategy, the objective of which is to increase the number of people of all ages — not just adults but young people — who are trained in CPR skills.

I am aware that there was an event in the Assembly today — unfortunately, I was not able to make it — hosted by the British Heart Foundation and involving some local schools. I understand that MLAs were also being taught how to perform CPR, although hopefully none will be required in this place, but you never know when those skills might be useful.

I know that the British Heart Foundation is doing the sort of work that it highlighted and showcased in the Assembly today. It has been doing that in many schools around Northern Ireland, and I very much encourage it in that. CPR is the sort of skill that, once developed, one will always have. There is no better setting to do that than in schools, particularly with there having been so many unfortunate examples in recent years of those involved in sporting activities having cardiac arrests. CPR should not be seen as something that just adults do but something that can affect young people. Therefore, training and support, where appropriate, is a good thing to do.

Blood Donations from Gay Men: Ban

5. **Ms Ruane** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what implications the recent European Court of Justice ruling will have on the current ban on blood donations from gay men. (AQO 8180/11-15)

Ms Ruane: I add my comhghairdeas — my congratulations — to the Minister in his new post. We look forward to working with him.

Mr Hamilton: The lifetime ban on blood donation applies to men who have had sex with men. It is based on sexual behaviour, not sexual orientation. In the case of Geoffrey Léger v the French Ministry of Health and the French Blood Service, the European Court of Justice concluded that the permanent deferral from blood donation may be justified in limited circumstances. In Northern Ireland, the judgement in the judicial review case on the matter is the subject of an appeal. The Northern Ireland Court of Appeal is aware of the Léger case. The appeal is due to be heard in October. In the meantime, it would not be appropriate to comment in detail on a matter that is before the courts.

Ms Ruane: It is very important, and I am sure that the House agrees, that we ensure equality for all our communities, including our LGB community. Will the Minister comment on whether he will be moving to lift the ban?

Mr Hamilton: As I tried to point out in my initial response, the original judgement in the case means that it is not my job to decide on the matter: the jurisdictional responsibility rests with the Secretary of State for Health in London. That is in part why an appeal has been taken: to try to establish authority in the

Northern Ireland Assembly and in my hands. If the appeal is successful and establishes that I am responsible, I have made it clear so far in post that the science and medical evidence guides me, and will guide me, in the matter.

I disagree with the Member. It is not an equality issue. In fact, I agree with the Irish Minister for Health who, whenever the Léger judgement was made public, pointed out, rightly, that it is a matter of patient safety, and only of patient safety. We must ensure that patients have an assurance that the blood being provided to them is safe, wherever it comes from. I will, as I said and will repeat, be guided by the science and the medical evidence. There is an emerging body of evidence on this, particularly from Great Britain. I will monitor, examine and carefully look at that and take my decisions accordingly.

2.30 pm

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That ends the period for listed questions. We will now move on to 15 minutes of topical questions.

GP Training Places

T1. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether he supports a recent report on general practice that recommended that at least 80 GP training places be created by August 2015 and, if so, whether he will ensure that funding be made available for the places. (AQT 2501/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: I am well aware of the issue. If I was not aware of it, I am becoming increasingly aware of it. I was lobbied, like many Members, by local GP practices on the issue over the last number of months. I am well aware of and recognise the current challenges that primary care across Northern Ireland faces. I am supportive of the critical role that our GPs provide as a front-line service to our citizens. My Department and I remain committed to working with the British Medical Association and others to identify opportunities to address the current and future challenges that primary care faces.

By way of our commitment to primary care and the work that GPs do in their surgeries across Northern Ireland, up to £15 million has been invested in primary-care services this year. That was announced at the start of this financial year. I think that that investment is a clear signal of the esteem in which we hold GPs, the work that they do and the vital role that they

perform in meeting everyone in Northern Ireland's current and future needs.

Mr Boylan: I thank the Minister for his answer. I also pass on my regards and wish him well in his new role. I appreciate that there has been an investment of £15 million in the sector, but does he agree that it falls short of the £33 million that the sector actually needs to bring it up to the same standard that there is in Scotland and Wales? Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Hamilton: I do not disagree. I am glad that the Member welcomed the £15 million investment, and I hope that GPs and primary-care practitioners also welcome it. I am sure that they will. That money is there to help them to modernise their services and to provide better support and care for our communities.

I would love to have more money to invest in a range of services. However, as the Member will be aware, that is inhibited not only by the broad, general Budget situation, whereby our spending as an Executive has not kept pace with inflation over the last number of years, which is set to continue for at least another two or three years, but by the fact that the Assembly is losing £2 million a week — £9.5 million a month — because of our failure to move forward on welfare reform. That is not our failure; rather, it is Sinn Féin's. I am not saying that I would get all the £114 million that we are paying out in penalties or that my Department would have got all the £100 million that has been lost already because of welfare reform penalties, but I think that a Department like Health, which is everybody in Northern Ireland's first or second public spending priority and which has consistently been the priority of the Finance Minister and others in the House, would have received the lion's share of that money. It could have been invested not just in primary care but in mental health, Transforming Your Care or a raft of different areas, which would have provided much-needed care, support and help for people across Northern Ireland.

Residential Care Homes

T2. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether he will take a fresh look at the statutory residential care homes issue and ensure that the ban on new permanent residents is removed in order that those homes can have some hope for the future, reflecting the vital role that they play in our community, particularly given that, tomorrow, the Health and Social Care Board is meeting to consider the five proposals from

each of the trusts for the future of statutory residential care homes. (AQT 2502/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: Before coming in for the commencement of the previous debate, I heard the Member speak in the debate prior to that on funding for voluntary and community services. I cannot remember exactly what he said, but he was talking about the difficult decisions that are going to be required in the current environment that we are in. This is one such area in which difficult decisions may be required.

I am well aware of the sensitivities about statutory care homes. I thank the Member for raising the issue, because it gives me the opportunity to make one particular point clear. Whatever decisions are made — we await the outcome of tomorrow's board meeting — the message that Edwin Poots gave when he was in post, which was reiterated by Jim Wells and which I am happy to reaffirm today, is absolutely critical: no resident of any statutory care home that is earmarked for closure at any point in the future will be moved out of their home against their will. It is incredibly important that, when this debate happens, as it inevitably will at some stage in the future if not in the next number of days, current residents of those care homes understand that they will not be moved out of their homes against their will.

Unfortunately, a lot of things were said in the past that scared people and caused grave concern. I accept that the issue was not handled well. I hope that, whatever decision the board takes, it will be treated with the sensitivity and respect that it deserves and that that important assurance that I have given, which my predecessors put in place, that no one will be moved out of their home against their will, will be received and understood by residents and their families.

Mr Beggs: Does the Minister recognise the vital role that such homes play in providing local respite care and an additional facility in supporting our hospitals during the winter pressures when even more elective surgery would otherwise have had to be cancelled? Will he widen his guarantee to include supported living accommodation, such as the one attached to Lisgarel statutory residential home, whose residents were delivered letters a number of years ago saying that they would have to find a new home? Will he ensure that those residents will be able to live in the supported housing that is attached to the residential home for as long as they wish?

Mr Hamilton: I am not aware of the details of the case that Mr Beggs raises, but I am happy to look at it and communicate with him. I accept his point that there is a role for statutory care homes in step-up and step-down provision in the multifunctional use of care homes. It is important to remember that. That service will continue to be provided. We sometimes focus too much on structures without concerning ourselves with the important services that are meant to be provided and recognising patterns of care. Many citizens want to remain in their homes a lot longer and live their lives out in their own properties. We want to continue to support that sort of independent living.

As I said, the issue has caused concern in the past. Whatever decisions are taken by the board, I want the matter to be handled with appropriate sensitivity and care and better than it was previously, and to ensure that all people who are affected understand that they will reach their own personal decision about where they want to be and whether they want to remain in a home or to move to other residential care. No one — not me or anybody on the board or in the trusts — will tell those people that they should move out of their homes, because those are their homes. We will always want to do what is best for people in residential care.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Question 3 has been withdrawn.

Health: Ministerial Challenges

T4. **Mr Douglas** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what key challenges he faces as the newly appointed Health Minister, given that all Members will recognise the great job that he did in his previous role as the Minister of Finance and Personnel, with the many challenges that he faced then. (AQT 2504/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: I do not think that I have sufficient time in two minutes to outline the full extent of the challenges that face the Health Department. I thought that I had a hard job until I moved into this one. There are many issues. My first week in post has highlighted the multitude of challenges that face the health and social care system in Northern Ireland. Those challenges are not unique to Northern Ireland and are faced by states, countries and nations right around the world.

The one thing that I will prioritise in my time in office is what I referred to in my previous response to the Chair of the Committee: the

need for transformation, reform and change in our health and social care system.

We have just had a discussion about statutory care homes. I know that talk of change can be frightening for many and that people have emotional attachments to facilities. That is understandable: I have many such attachments, and I am sure that everybody here does as well. However, in the time that I have in office, I want to move on the need to transform our health service.

I have read Sir Liam Donaldson's report and, indeed, the comments by the Chief Medical Officer today, and it is very clear that, in many respects, Northern Ireland has the capacity to have a world-class health and social care service. We talked previously about coronary care, which is a really good example of where we have a world-class specialist service, and there are other examples. In many respects, we are very good, but I want us to be good in everything and to be world class. We need change to achieve that, but the point that I want to make is that, whilst we face change, and change is inevitable in our health and social care sector, it must be always be change for the better. That is what I want to lead on and ensure that it becomes a reality during my time in office and beyond.

Mr Douglas: On the theme of challenges, what impact will the failure to implement the Stormont House Agreement have on your health budget?

Mr Hamilton: That was teased out a little in my response to Mr Boylan. It is not having an effect on this year's health budget yet. A Budget is in place, and all Departments are operating to it. However, that Budget will unravel very quickly if the finances and flexibilities that flowed from the Stormont House Agreement are not secured.

The House will probably be most familiar with the £200 million for the voluntary exit scheme. My Department, like many Departments, is relying on making pay bill savings in-year through the use of that £200 million to let some people exit the system early. If that does not happen, we will be into a crisis situation, not just with my Department's budget but with the budgets of every Executive Minister.

Where one could argue that it is having an impact is that we are needlessly losing £9.5 million each and every month because of our failure to move forward on welfare reform. I think that we have sometimes glossed over or forgotten the impact of the loss of £114 million

this year, which is the total fine, and the £100 million that has been lost to date. If that £9.5 million was received by my Department, it would allow me to help to provide 1,800 hip operations or 2,100 knee operations. It is the cost equivalent of 900,000 prescriptions items, 264,000 GP consultations, 16,000 weeks of nursing home care or 233,000 physiotherapy treatments. I hear some argue, in this place and in the media, that, by resisting welfare reform and incurring these penalties, they are helping the needy and the vulnerable in Northern Ireland. There are no more needy and vulnerable people than those on the waiting list for hip or knee operations —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask the Minister to come to a conclusion.

Mr Hamilton: — or those who need nursing home care or physiotherapy.

Home Accident Prevention

T5. **Mr Anderson** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action is being taken to reduce domestic accidents and improve home safety. (AQT 2505/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: In February, my Department launched a new 10-year strategy for home accident prevention. The strategy's vision is that the population of Northern Ireland has the best chance of living safely in a home environment in which there is negligible risk of unintentional injury.

The strategy sets out four main objectives, which I will share with the House, each of which is supported by a set of strategic priorities. The objectives are to empower people to better understand the risks and make safe choices to ensure a safe home with negligible risk of unintentional injury; to promote safer home environments; to promote and facilitate effective training skills and knowledge in home accident prevention across all relevant organisations and groups; and to improve our evidence base.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Time is up.

2.45 pm

Justice

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Questions 8 and 14 have been withdrawn.

Fuel Laundering

1. **Mr Irwin** asked the Minister of Justice, in light of the ongoing and serious problem of the sale of laundered fuel locally, for his assessment of whether current legislation is strong enough to deter a filling station operator from acquiring and retailing laundered fuel knowingly. (AQO 8191/11-15)

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): Fuel excise evasion and the related legislation is a reserved matter and is the responsibility of HM Revenue and Customs and the Treasury. Between February and May this year, HMRC consulted on a discussion document relating to penalties, which is the first stage in a wider review aimed at making it hard for a dishonest minority to cheat the system, including, of course, filling stations selling illicit fuel. In addition, they are continuing to look at legislative issues regarding naming and shaming filling stations where laundered diesel has been found: something that I have been pursuing with them.

My Department and HMRC are organising a seminar on fuel laundering to be held in June. It will involve all relevant agencies and will be a forum to discuss whether there are areas in which more can be done.

Mr Irwin: I thank the Minister for his response. Given that a fairly recent survey identified that up to 50% of filling stations in Northern Ireland are selling laundered fuel, does he feel that legislation is in place to deal with the problem? Naming and shaming filling stations is one thing, but surely it is a criminal offence to sell illicit fuel.

Mr Ford: Yes, of course it is a criminal offence, and prosecutions are the responsibility of HMRC. Members need to be careful when quoting the number of filling stations that may be committing this offence. That was not particularly helped by a press release issued some time ago by HMRC that referred to the number of filling stations involved in selling laundered fuel, as opposed to the number of occasions on which detections had been made. The number with multiple offences means that the number of filling stations that have actually been engaged in that process is significantly lower. My understanding is that, in the last two years, the number of individual retail sites that were found to be in possession of illicit fuel were 33 in 2013-14 and 45 in 2014-15; a lot less than half.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Is the Minister satisfied that all

necessary steps are being taken to ensure that only legal diesel is being sold at filling stations?

Mr Ford: No. That is why I am in constant contact with the Treasury to seek to ensure that action is taken robustly. There are issues around the confidentiality of individuals' tax returns that are entirely different from protecting the public where illicit fuel is being sold in petrol stations. That may happen even where the nominal ownership of a petrol station may change hands, leaving individuals vulnerable even if there are prosecutions against those who perpetrated the crime in the first place. I believe that a lot more needs to be done and I will continue to pursue it with the Treasury.

Mrs Overend: This is a very serious issue and it is ongoing even in my constituency of Mid Ulster. Can the Minister state what impact the National Crime Agency (NCA) being able to operate in Northern Ireland is likely to have on measures to break up the criminal gangs responsible for fuel laundering?

Mr Ford: I am always encouraged when Members want to highlight the benefits of the NCA. Of course, on the specific issue of non-devolved crime, which includes evasion of excise duty, there is no additional benefit, although we are aware that gangs that launder fuel are also engaged in other varieties of crime, some of which is a devolved matter. Therefore, I have no doubt that, when the NCA becomes operational next week, it will add to our overall fight against organised criminals generally.

Mr Byrne: Will the Minister state what discussions have taken place with the mainstream oil companies who import oil to this island? What advice does he have for those who want to run a legal filling station but who cannot compete with the contraband sellers?

Mr Ford: I have not had direct discussions, although I will shortly be having discussions with those who operate in the legal trade. Mr Byrne makes an entirely valid point about ensuring that people are able to support only those selling legitimate fuel. One of the key issues, of course, is the fact that the new marker is now in place. That makes it significantly easier to ensure that the fuel cannot be laundered without considerable expense. I think that that will certainly assist in the fight against organised criminals. Certainly, within a very short time, all diesel sold across the UK and Ireland will have the new marker in it. That is a key area.

The fact that we are having not only our own conference but a Europe-wide conference in Northern Ireland this year is an indication that we are leading the fight. However, we clearly need to ensure that we use every possible means, and I believe that naming and shaming will be a key part of that.

Prisoners: Transfer

2. **Mr Sheehan** asked the Minister of Justice what impact the EU Council framework decision on the transfer of sentenced persons 2008/909/JHA has had on the transfer of prisoners from this jurisdiction. (AQO 8192/11-15)

Mr Ford: To date, my Department has not repatriated any individual, either into or out of this jurisdiction, under the new compulsory return arrangements that were introduced by the EU Council framework decision on the transfer of sentenced persons. Rather, we have continued to rely on the terms of the original 1983 convention, which provided for agreed repatriations. Since April 2010, we have repatriated 11 individuals and accepted two into this jurisdiction from EU member states.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra ansin. Is there a time frame for resolving this issue completely?

Mr Ford: I am not sure that this issue needs to be resolved in that sense, on the basis that the original arrangements are working well in this jurisdiction. They provide for repatriation in a way that aids rehabilitation and reduces the likelihood of reoffending. On the specific issues, whilst a majority of EU member states have signed up to the new proposals, Ireland in particular has not and, therefore, it is not possible to use the compulsory arrangements for repatriation with the Republic of Ireland. At the moment, I have no reason to believe that the current use of the original 1983 convention is inadequate.

Mr Campbell: Given the ongoing changing nature of the EU and the possible change that may come over the next few years, has the Minister had any discussions with his counterparts in the rest of the United Kingdom should the compulsory element be required?

Mr Ford: No, I have not yet had any discussions with those who bear these particular responsibilities in Westminster, or in

Whitehall, to be more specific. I will wait and see what further proposals there may be, depending upon what discussions the UK Government have with the EU.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for his answers. Have there been any discussions with the Minister for Justice and Equality in the Republic of Ireland in relation to the current position of the Republic's Government on prisoner transfers under the EU arrangements?

Mr Ford: No, I have not had the opportunity to discuss that particular issue with Frances Fitzgerald since it arose, but I will meet her shortly and expect that it will feature at that meeting.

Ballymena Courthouse

3. **Mr Swann** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the proposed closure of Ballymena courthouse. (AQO 8193/11-15)

Mr Ford: The consultation on the rationalisation of the court estate ran until today, 18 May. The responses to the consultation will be analysed and recommendations will be prepared. I have met a number of MLAs, local councillors and community representatives, including a delegation from Ballymena, to discuss the consultation. No final decisions on any of the proposals will be made until the autumn.

Mr Swann: I appreciate that, as the Minister said, the consultation closes today, but will he reassure us that the consultation is not just dressing and that the decision has not already been taken to close Ballymena courthouse? That is the perception among practitioners, the judicial system and everybody else who is involved with Ballymena courthouse at present.

Mr Ford: The DOJ's record on consultations, for example, the one on prisons some time ago, which the Members for East Londonderry will recall — there is one staring straight at me at the moment — is an indication that, when the DOJ does consultations, it listens to their contents. I was slightly surprised, given that I wrote to the chief executive of Mid and East Antrim Borough Council on 26 March about contacts on possible community uses of Ballymena courthouse, which had been suggested at my meeting with the council, to discover that, in last week's local papers in Antrim and Ballymena, there was a report that the council was demanding to get names of people to speak to in the DOJ from me, despite

the fact that they were told of it on 26 March. I am keen that those discussions should happen.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Again, will the Minister ensure that this is not a consultation with a predetermined outcome as has been the case before, as the previous contributor said? Is he taking the rural impact into consideration? How will this decision be rural-proofed when he reaches his conclusions?

Mr Ford: I am not sure how many times I have to say that this is a consultation and there are no predetermined answers, but, if Mr McKay likes, I will say that this is a consultation and there are no predetermined answers. Those who have read the consultation document will have seen references to things like travel times. There are clearly issues that have some effect, but the key thing for me is to ensure that people get the best possible facilities when they reach a courthouse. It is not necessarily about there being a courthouse close at hand but that there is a fit-for-purpose courthouse within a reasonable travelling distance.

Mr Allister: Some of us might be surprised to hear the Minister speak of the efficacy of the Department's response to consultations, bearing in mind his "I know better" response to the overwhelming rejection of his foetal abnormality consultation. On this consultation, can he tell us whether there has been a single response supportive of closing Ballymena courthouse? Certainly, there was not at the public meeting that was held.

Mr Ford: Of course, in the case of fatal foetal abnormality, the view that I took was that those who know most about this — the medical professions, the nurses and the midwives — know better than I or others do.

This consultation has not closed, and I have not seen the report of responses; therefore, I cannot answer on what the responses to this consultation are.

Mr Dallat: I am not directly involved in the popular campaign to keep Ballymena courthouse open. However, given that socially deprived people without transport are over-represented among those who appear in court, does the Minister think that his policy of closing courthouses across the North, particularly in Limavady, was a bright idea?

Mr Ford: I do not think that the cuts that were imposed on my Department's budget were a

particularly bright idea, but I have to live with them.

Mr Dickson: Minister, would you agree with me that the effective and efficient running of our Court Service should be paramount in determining any use of the court estate, particularly when it comes to the use of the court estate for victims and ensuring that there are victim-friendly courthouses with appropriate facilities in them?

Mr Ford: Yes; that is a point that I tried to make earlier. The important issue is that we have the best possible facilities for people who are using courthouses, not that they are necessarily close at hand. We are not in the days when the resident magistrate rode around on his pony to assorted courthouses in the backrooms of hotels, community halls and whatever. We have to ensure, for example, that victims get properly treated, that young people are segregated from adults and that all those issues are better done in some of our more modern courthouses, as indeed I inspected at Laganside just last week. The challenge is to ensure that courthouses are fit for purpose, not that they are at every street corner.

Community Policing: North Down

4. **Mr Dunne** asked the Minister of Justice for his assessment of whether the new community policing structure within North Down is fit for purpose. (AQO 8194/11-15)

Mr Ford: The community policing structure in North Down is an operational matter for the Chief Constable, who is accountable to the Policing Board. However, I have every confidence in the Chief Constable and his senior officers to put appropriate structures in place in all the new policing districts.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for his answer. As Justice Minister, does he recognise the need for the continuation of community policing locally in North Down in places like Holywood and Bangor and the need to have police available not eight or 10 miles away but in the area where they know people, communicate and build vital relationships?

Mr Ford: As I made clear, Mr Dunne's question is about operational matters for the Chief Constable. However, faced with the budget cuts that have been imposed on DOJ, a large measure of which have had to be passed to the police, even though they have been protected compared with other areas of justice spending,

it has been for the Chief Constable to determine how he prioritises. He clearly has to prioritise certain elements of his work over others that, we might all agree, are desirable but are not necessarily essential at a time of difficulty.

Keir Starmer: Independent Review

5. **Mr Eastwood** asked the Minister of Justice for his assessment of the independent review conducted by Sir Keir Starmer of the prosecutorial systems and processes in relation to three interlinked cases involving sex abuse and terrorist-related charges. (AQO 8195/11-15)

Mr Ford: I am unable to give an assessment of Sir Keir Starmer's independent review, as the report of his findings has not yet been published.

3.00 pm

Mr Eastwood: That brings me nicely to my supplementary question: when will the report be published?

Mr Ford: That is a very reasonable question, but, since Sir Keir Starmer was preparing the report for Barra McGrory, the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP), and not for the DOJ, I am not entirely clear on that point. My understanding is that it is likely to be published within the next week, but it is in the hands of Sir Keir and the DPP, not me or anybody to do with the DOJ.

Stormont House Agreement: Progress

6. **Mr Lunn** asked the Minister of Justice what progress has been made in implementing those aspects of the Stormont House Agreement that fall to his Department. (AQO 8196/11-15)

Mr Ford: I am committed to implementing the elements of the Stormont House Agreement that fall to my Department as promptly as possible. Under the agreement, my Department is responsible for the establishment of the new historical investigations unit (HIU) and improving the legacy inquest function. The HIU will be an independent body to take forward investigations of outstanding Troubles-related deaths. The legislation required to set up the HIU will be progressed through a Westminster Bill. Drafting is at an advanced stage, and I expect the Bill to be introduced in Parliament in the autumn. My intention is to establish the HIU by summer 2016 and for it to

be operational by the autumn of next year. In developing the legislation, my officials have been working closely with key stakeholders, including victims and victims' groups. The early recruitment of the HIU's director will be taken forward by OFMDFM in consultation with my Department. Plans are under way to have the post filled by December this year.

To improve the way in which the legacy inquest function is conducted, a number of changes are being progressed, including the allocation of cases to a higher judicial tier to case manage and hear legacy inquests. To allow that to happen, it has been agreed that the existing County Court judicial complement will be increased. I will also meet the Lord Chief Justice to discuss when he will assume the role of president of the Coroners' Court, in accordance with the Legal Aid and Coroners Act (Northern Ireland) 2014.

My Department has been set a challenging agenda by the agreement, but work is well under way to deliver the necessary changes.

Mr Lunn: I thank the Minister for his answer. I note his confidence that the HIU will be set up and be operational by autumn 2016, but does he share my fear that the lack of agreement on other matters — in particular, welfare reform — presents a real risk to the interests of the victims, families and survivors who have placed their hopes in the Stormont House Agreement?

Mr Ford: Yes, I agree with my colleague. There is no doubt that good work has been done, to a certain extent at the party leaders' meetings and certainly in terms of the work being done by my officials. I also acknowledge the work being done by officials in the Northern Ireland Office, who will be responsible for the Bill at Westminster in conjunction with my officials. It is clear that there are many other aspects of the Stormont House Agreement, most particularly around welfare reform, that have not yet been dealt with and have the potential to derail the entire process, which would do real damage to the victims who have invested their hopes in the Stormont House Agreement delivering for them.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagraí go dtí seo. I thank the Minister for his answers to date. Irrespective of what works out in terms of the Stormont House Agreement, will the autonomy and independence of the inquest system remain unchanged?

Mr Ford: Yes, I assure Mr McCartney that the legacy inquests will remain entirely unchanged in terms of autonomy. Assigning judges from a higher tier to take responsibility for some of the legacy inquests will, we trust, ensure that matters proceed more speedily, more effectively and more efficiently, particularly for the benefit of those who were bereaved and have been seeking a full and proper inquest, as they see it, for some considerable time. As I said, I will discuss that issue with the Lord Chief Justice shortly when looking at his responsibilities. I hope that we will see significant progress around that area, but there is the matter of legislation going in one single Bill at Westminster that may be derailed by other matters.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Mo bhuíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagraí go dtí seo. I thank the Minister for his answers up to this point. Dealing with and expanding on Mr Lunn's theme, particularly in relation to legacy and historical inquiry issues, is the Minister satisfied that there will be enough funding to deal with those important matters?

Mr Ford: The precise detail of funding is not entirely clear at this stage. It depends on how much is done at what pace. Mr McGlone raises an entirely reasonable question. In very rough figures, we are now offered £30 million a year for five years by the Treasury, on top of what was probably in the region of £10 million going from the existing justice system, for something that could cost up to £50 million a year. That detail will have to be worked through. My officials have started a considerable amount of work on that, but, of course, until we get wider agreement on other issues, it is not guaranteed that we will receive that money from the Treasury, although it is clear that we need that money and we need it rapidly.

Firearms Certification

7. **Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister of Justice to detail the number of personnel employed in the firearms certification process. (AQO 8197/11-15)

Mr Ford: The certification of firearms is a matter for the Chief Constable. I am advised that he has a complement of 35 members of staff in the firearms licensing branch at police headquarters to process firearms certificates. There are also 29 locally based firearms enquiry officers who are involved in the licensing process. I have a small team that processes firearms appeals and prohibitions in

devolved cases, as does the NIO for non-devolved cases.

Mr Hilditch: I thank the Minister for his answer. I suppose the crux of the question is all about efficiencies and improvements to service. It appears that there are quite lengthy turnaround periods at times. I have been quoted several months. Has the Minister had any discussions on how that could be improved?

Mr Ford: There have been discussions for a considerable period. We are obliged to adopt a full-cost recovery model by DFP. It is clear that the current payments are not covering the costs, which is why there is a proposal for a fee increase. I am also keen to see that that proceeds in as efficient a way as possible. Indeed, my officials had a meeting just last week with representatives of elements of the gun trade and others and discussed how that might apply. I believe that some progress was made around fees. We also looked at other issues, like a banded system that would provide further benefits for those who shoot.

Prisoners: Employment Prospects

9. **Mrs Cochrane** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the work of the Prison Service to improve the employment prospects of prisoners on release. (AQO 8199/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Prison Service employability strategy is a public commitment to support individuals in custody to develop qualifications, skills and experience linked to labour market needs in order to increase their potential for gaining employment on release. The strategy aims to expand the opportunities for individuals to gain practical work experience whilst in custody that mirrors the expectations of employers and better prepares them for the workplace. Significant progress has been made, including engaging with employers to dispel some of the myths around employing people who have offended, increasing the number of placement opportunities available for prisoners as part of the pre-release process and establishing a corporate and standardised approach to working with employers.

Alongside the employability strategy, work is progressing to improve the levels of educational attainment amongst prisoners and provide them with specific skills aimed at supporting employment. When responsibility for learning and skills in the prison establishments transfers to Belfast Metropolitan College and the North West Regional College, an accredited course in employability skills will be offered to all

prisoners. The course is designed to support an individual to successfully gain employment and progress in their chosen field, prepare them for further study where necessary and support the development of techniques required for successful independent living.

I am confident that through the implementation of the employability strategy and our work to improve skills, we will significantly increase the opportunities available to prisoners on their release and support desistance from crime.

Mrs Cochrane: I thank the Minister for his answer and welcome the strong focus being placed on improving the employability prospects of prisoners and the resulting impact on reducing reoffending rates. What more can the Prison Service do to engage with the private sector to seek its support in this important initiative?

Mr Ford: Work has been done on engaging with the private sector over the last year or two, which has seen significant progress. Last year, 53 new employers were engaged and committed to working with the Prison Service to provide placement opportunities across Northern Ireland for those in custody and being released from custody. In November last year, the Prison Service held a Recruit with Conviction event for employers to raise awareness and understanding of community sentences. The Prison Service has also been working in conjunction with the UK-wide organisation, the Employers' Forum for Reducing Re-offending, to help establish a similar strategic employer network local to Northern Ireland. Placements are now actively being provided for prisoners in all three establishments, and I believe that it shows that a significant amount of good progress is being made.

I am extremely grateful to employers who have seen the benefits in that, including, of course, some that are nationally-based and have previously worked in Great Britain to provide opportunities for prisoners.

I trust that we will see further work going through, particularly as we look at learning lessons from the Employers' Forum for Reducing Re-offending.

Mr Ross: I think that everybody in the House would rather see ex-offenders getting proper jobs when released from prison rather than living a life on welfare at the cost of the taxpayer. How much more difficult is it to achieve that goal when budgets are being cut

for organisations such as NIACRO, which does so much good work with former prisoners and employers to try to find them meaningful employment?

Mr Ford: I certainly agree with Mr Ross that it is more difficult when some of our voluntary sector partners are losing money, particularly funding from the European social fund, which NIACRO was unsuccessful in securing this year. The reality is that we are seeking to manage things as best we can by looking directly to a range of private-sector employers, as well as through the good work that was being done by organisations such as NIACRO and Extern. However, it is all part of living with the difficult Budget settlement that we have. We are seeking to make the best job of it that we can, despite the cuts.

Mr Beggs: Will the Minister acknowledge that the Worktrack programme run by NIACRO had very successful outcomes? However, as a result of loss of funding, some 36 experienced workers in the sector will have lost their job. What gives him confidence that that good work can be replicated by the further education colleges?

Mr Ford: A number of different strands go together. I fully acknowledge, and I repeat to Mr Beggs, that there are problems with the cuts that have had to be made, from a variety of different backgrounds, on organisations such as NIACRO. The direct work that is being done with employers and the work that will be taken forward by the two further education colleges, including specific formal skills, will all assist. However, it is a key issue that requires a lot of effort, and it is difficult to do all that we would wish to, given the cuts being imposed on the Department. That is the unfortunate reality.

Abortion: Guidelines/Legislation

10. **Ms Lo** asked the Minister of Justice for his assessment of the recent comments from the First Minister that termination for fatal foetal abnormality can be dealt with by guidelines rather than the proposed changes in law. (AQO 8200/11-15)

11. **Ms Ruane** asked the Minister of Justice why legislation is required to deal with cases of fatal foetal abnormality. (AQO 8201/11-15)

Mr Ford: With your permission, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I will take questions 10 and 11 together.

The recent remarks by the First Minister on the subject of guidelines for abortion contradict previous statements by former DUP Health Minister Edwin Poots, when he said, on more than one occasion, that guidelines were unable to deal with cases of foetal abnormality and that such cases would require an amendment to the criminal law, which was a matter for the Department of Justice. It is therefore hard to understand the reasons for the First Minister's comments.

As I have said previously, guidelines can only define the law at the present time; they cannot change it. It is simply not correct to say that we can resolve the tragedies of women carrying fetuses with fatal abnormalities by changing the guidelines. Currently, in the circumstances of fatal foetal abnormality, a woman can have an abortion in Northern Ireland only if there is a risk to her life or a risk of serious permanent or long-term injury to her mental or physical health. Where a woman does not meet that test but feels that she cannot continue with the pregnancy, she is prevented by our law from having an abortion in Northern Ireland.

Following consideration of responses to the recent consultation, I am proposing a change in the law to provide a statutory exemption to allow for a lawful abortion to be an option for a woman who has received a diagnosis in pregnancy of a fatal foetal abnormality. Those tragic circumstances can be addressed only by a change in the criminal law, which will provide clarity for practitioners and for women faced with the devastating diagnosis of fatal foetal abnormality.

Ms Lo: I thank the Minister for his response and for his work on this very difficult issue. Can he advise the Assembly whether he intends to proceed with taking his proposal to the Executive? Does he believe that the Executive should allow the Assembly to consider rather than block legislation on the issue?

Mr Ford: Yes. The answer is simple: I gave a commitment that there would be a paper to the Executive from the Department of Justice on the issue, recommending that, in this narrow area, abortions be allowed in circumstances of fatal foetal abnormality. That is the commitment that I gave, and that is what I have instructed officials to do. I trust that we will have a paper prepared in the very near future that will go to the Executive. I also trust that those who said that they do not think that such a measure could pass in the Assembly will allow the Executive to put it to the Assembly so that the views of the representatives of the

people of Northern Ireland can be tested in the Chamber.

3.15 pm

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That ends the period for listed questions. We will move on to topical questions.

Young Offenders: Early Intervention

T1. **Mr Ross** asked the Minister of Justice what collaborative actions he has taken with the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Minister of Education to help to identify those children most at risk of offending and to have the appropriate interventions in place to ensure that they do not enter the justice system in later life, given that, last week, NIACRO hosted an informative event in Parliament Buildings at which the guest speaker, Karyn McCluskey, the director of the Scottish violence reduction unit talked in particular about the importance of early interventions with children and the fact that, as we are all aware, it is sadly too easy to identify those children who are at most risk of offending. (AQT 2511/11-15)

Mr Ford: I am happy to confirm the general tenor of my Committee Chair's question. In a sense, there are two issues that we need to talk about, one of which is early intervention in the context of interventions in early childhood to help children who might otherwise have difficulties in their family. There are then early interventions for those who, perhaps in their early teenage years, are in danger of getting sucked in to criminal activity. The former is clearly not particularly the DOJ's responsibility. Indeed, we can look at the lifestyles of some of the families with whom a number of voluntary groups are working in projects like those that I have seen in the west Belfast and Shankill community interventions. There are benefits to health and social care within a year or two of getting involved in such a project, benefits to education in two or three years and benefits to justice in 10 years. That is why it is more difficult for us to justify it at a time of limited expenditure. Nonetheless, the Department is participating in some of those projects and will continue to do so, as well as continuing the work that we are doing on diversionary activity for young teenagers.

Mr Ross: I thank the Minister for that answer. It is a stark reality that between 55% and 65% of young people who are offending have some sort of communication issue that may well have led to the circumstances that they are in. Back

in September 2013, the Minister, along with the Health Minister at the time, funded a speech and language therapist for Woodlands. Given that funding for that has been cut, would the Minister consider doing that again to help those young people to try to turn their life around?

Mr Ford: Yes. I am grateful to Mr Ross for pointing that out. Members will be aware of my intention to provide a full-time speech and language therapist for the Youth Justice Agency, principally for those in Woodlands but potentially also for some in the community. The reality is that, with the current budget arrangements, it has not been possible to provide that post. I have asked officials to look at what may be possible as developments go through and as the Youth Justice Agency looks at its overall budgeting in the future, but, unfortunately, it has not been possible to get that position filled at this stage. It is clearly an issue, given that so many young people in custody have problems in speech and language. Of course, we see issues in mental health as well.

Legal Highs: Council Actions

T2. **Ms Lo** asked the Minister of Justice whether he welcomes the work of Belfast City Council and other councils in using the powers at their disposal to tackle the sale of so-called legal highs and whether he will encourage other councils to follow suit. (AQT 2512/11-15)

Mr Ford: I am happy to endorse the good work that Belfast and, I think, Larne and Omagh councils did in addressing those so-called head shops that were selling so-called legal highs. New psychoactive substances (NPSs) is a more accurate description. I have also been in contact with the Home Office about the issue and hope to have a meeting with the relevant Home Office Minister when individual Ministers' responsibilities are sorted out. That is because, as Members will be aware, the specific issue of the Misuse of Drugs Act is a reserved matter. It is clear that a number of councils in Northern Ireland have done good work. That was clearly a step forward, but I believe that we need the law to be more comprehensively joined up in the future.

Ms Lo: It is very welcome to hear that the Minister will engage with the Home Office again on the matter. Will he involve the Irish Government in banning the sale of those substances?

Mr Ford: As part of a study in the latter part of last year, the Home Office specifically looked at

the Irish legislation, which seems to me to have been a major bonus, and its potential benefits. The fact that the relevant shops were, by and large, closed down almost overnight in the Republic whereas, in Northern Ireland, we still have the problem of having to take individual action is an example that we can learn from, which is not always the case in social matters from our neighbours across the border. The key issue will be to persuade the Home Office of its responsibilities across the UK as a whole, to learn the lessons and to ensure that we and other parts of the UK get the benefit.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Question 3 has been withdrawn.

Prisoners: Reoffenders

T4. **Mr Byrne** asked the Minister of Justice, following his answer about NIACRO and the budget cuts, what consequences he sees for the number of people who might end up in prison as reoffenders. (AQT 2514/11-15)

Mr Ford: I do not think that it is possible to say what we would see as a direct consequence. I regret the fact that the Department of Justice has had to cut back some grants to the voluntary sector, particularly because, faced with a difficult budget settlement from 2010 to 2014, the Department of Justice was able to prioritise front-line services, including those provided by our voluntary sector partners. Significant reductions were made in the back office, which continue to be made this year, but the reality is that the ongoing difficult budget settlement becoming even more difficult this year means that we can no longer protect our voluntary sector partners as we had sought to do for the first four years of devolution.

Mr Byrne: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does the Minister still have full confidence in NIACRO and its work in trying to rehabilitate offenders? What implications does it have for the Probation Board, given that it also plays a vital role with young offenders?

Mr Ford: I am not sure whether it is appropriate that I should say that I have full confidence in any body, particularly those that are not directly accountable to me, but I have significant confidence in the good work that is being done by a range of voluntary sector partners, not least NIACRO. I do not wish to start to have to name all of them, but NIACRO seems to have featured a number of times in questions today. We have had a good working relationship. A lot of good, positive work has been done by our NGO partners.

I also have significant confidence in the work being done by the Probation Board and the Youth Justice Agency, as the key elements of the formal justice system, in comparison with what I see of probation services in England and Wales, where privatisation and financial incentives do not seem to have delivered anything like the quality of service provided by the professionals and professionally qualified social workers who work in probation here. We should be very grateful for that. I have, therefore, sought to protect the budgets to those front-line services, whether statutory or voluntary, as far as possible, but, unfortunately, I cannot protect them entirely.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Question 5 has been withdrawn.

Prison Service: Staffing

T6. **Mr Anderson** asked the Minister of Justice for his assessment of the current level of staffing in the Northern Ireland Prison Service. (AQT 2516/11-15)

Mr Ford: Clearly, the level of staffing in the Prison Service is less than we would hope for at this stage. A number of vacancies are being covered by overtime, and recruitment issues are being looked at again against the difficult budget settlement, which has seen significant reductions in the Prison Service budget for this year.

Mr Anderson: I thank the Minister for that response. Following a recent fire and act of arson in Maghaberry prison as recently as 26 April, do you agree that those radical reductions in staffing levels and the pressures that have been placed on existing staff might have played a part in the fire? Do you further agree that it throws into serious doubt the ability of the directors of Maghaberry to manage the prison on the basis of the current staffing levels, bearing in mind that, over the last five years, there has been a reduction of some 800 staff?

Mr Ford: We need to take care when we simply quote numbers of staff. The numbers that Mr Anderson gave are slightly larger than the exact numbers of reductions. Specific new blocks, for example, do not require anything like the same number of staff for supervision. The reduction in escorting lower-risk prisoners around Maghaberry has also resulted in a reduction in numbers, but it is clear that there is a difficult management problem in Maghaberry, which is probably the most complex prison in the United Kingdom, given the number of groups of prisoners that are housed there.

I believe that good work is being done in Maghaberry, but it is an ongoing challenge. The shortage of staff and the number of staff on sick leave make that particularly difficult.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Question 7 has been withdrawn.

Specialist Forensic Unit: Victims' Concerns

T8. **Mr Brady** asked the Minister of Justice what steps he will take to address victims' concerns raised in the BBC 'Spotlight' programme on Tuesday 12 May, which dealt with the specialist forensic unit in Special Branch. (AQT 2518/11-15)

Mr Ford: Clearly, there are public concerns, but we need to be careful in this place when dealing with issues of a number of years ago. I understand that the specific unit in Special Branch that was referred to was wound up some time before the devolution of justice to here. There are issues of significant concern relating to the death of police officers and civilians, and those are matters for investigation by the Police Ombudsman, who has the formal remit to do that. I am not sure that I should say much beyond that while we allow the ombudsman's office to carry out its enquiries.

Mr Brady: I thank the Minister for his answer. Given that the show identified issues of police integrity, will the Minister now publicly encourage former and current members of the PSNI/RUC to cooperate fully with the Police Ombudsman and the historical investigations unit?

Mr Ford: I have no problem with repeating Mr Brady's point. I have always encouraged those who serve or have served in the Police Service or the RUC to give whatever help they can to the ombudsman's office in carrying out its investigations. I note that that point has also been made by a number of retired officers on different occasions. It is clearly the best way of enhancing confidence in policing, alongside the good work that is being done by the ombudsman and the work that has made the PSNI a very different body from the RUC when a number of those difficulties were happening.

Maghaberry Fire: Damage Costs

T9. **Mr Cree** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the cost of damage caused by the recent fire in Erne House in Maghaberry, given

that media reports have estimated £800,000. (AQT 2519/11-15)

Mr Ford: I cannot give Mr Cree a precise figure at this stage, though, clearly, work has to go on to establish that. However, do not necessarily believe everything that you read in the Sunday papers. People say, "They suggest £400,000, so assume that you double that."

Mr Cree: That is why it is always good to have the facts. By way of a supplementary, may I ask the Minister to give us an assurance that he is working to address the concerns of the Prison Service staff in Maghaberry, who have low morale? Just to be in no doubt, who exactly is in charge?

Mr Ford: The answer is very clear. The director general of the Prison Service is in charge, the governor of Maghaberry is in charge of Maghaberry and individual governors are responsible for their particular areas of responsibility. There is clearly a staffing issue there: for example, there is a very high level of sickness absence in Maghaberry at present. However, it is important to ensure that we do not undermine the good work being done and that we seek to ensure that the reform programme, which has produced some significant benefits in recent months at Hydebank Wood, with the transformation to the college, and at Magilligan also proceeds apace at Maghaberry.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr David McIlveen is not in his place. Time is up.

Question for Urgent Oral Answer

Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Pneumococcal Disease Outbreak at Harland and Wolff

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr Phil Flanagan has given notice of an urgent oral question to the Minister of Health Social Services and Public Safety. I remind Members that, if they wish to ask a supplementary question, they should rise continually in their place. The Member who tabled the question will be called automatically to ask a supplementary.

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on the work being carried out to protect employees and assess the current and future risk to workers following the recent cluster outbreak of pneumococcal disease at Harland and Wolff, Belfast.

3.30 pm

Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): The Public Health Agency (PHA) has been coordinating the response to the cluster of cases of pneumococcal disease at Harland and Wolff. There have been four confirmed cases, with onset dates between 28 April and 6 May. All have been treated in hospital.

It has been recognised for some time that there is an increased risk of invasive pneumococcal disease associated with welding. The green book, which is the UK's authoritative guidance on vaccination, provides specific guidance about protecting those at risk of frequent or continuous occupational exposure to metal fumes, including welders. The key preventative measures are pneumococcal vaccine, prophylactic use of antibiotics and measures to limit exposure to metal fumes and dust.

The PHA led a risk assessment process at Harland and Wolff, which identified the workers at immediate risk requiring public health intervention. They are being offered antibiotic prophylaxis and pneumococcal vaccine. About 450 workers were given antibiotics and vaccine over the weekend, with a further 150 being seen today. The Public Health Agency expects

to complete this work at Harland and Wolff by 9.00 pm today, and that no further clinics will be needed.

Vaccination may reduce the risk of invasive pneumococcal disease but it does not replace measures to prevent or reduce exposure. Ongoing prevention is primarily a matter for Harland and Wolff's occupational health department, with support and guidance from the Health and Safety Executive of Northern Ireland.

Mr Flanagan: I thank the Minister for his answer. I commend the PHA and the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) on their efforts to deal with this matter, in conjunction with the trade union.

I thank the Minister for that information, but can he give us an assurance that, even though he expects this to be completed by 9.00 pm, representatives from the PHA and the HSE will continue to work with representatives and the organisation to make sure that any future risks are dealt with in a time-appropriate manner?

Mr Hamilton: I join the Member in commending the Public Health Agency and its health protection service on their rapid response. The fact that they dealt with 450 workers over the weekend and into today shows the extent of their work and their skill.

I am content to give an assurance that, should it be required — I hope it is not — the PHA will be there to assist Harland and Wolff and its staff as appropriate. Hopefully now that these measures have been taken, with vaccinations and so forth, there will be no further incidences of this disease.

Obviously, we will continue to monitor the situation, but as I pointed out in response to the main question, a lot of the work from here on will be carried out by the Health and Safety Executive to ensure that, with the heightened risk to welders of contracting pneumococcal disease through metal fumes, whatever preventative work needs to be done with Harland and Wolff's occupational health service and health and safety processes will be carried out. I am sure that the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment will ensure that that is provided to Harland and Wolff.

Mr Easton: Is the Department taking this outbreak seriously, and has it been able to identify its source?

Mr Hamilton: I understand that the source is the metal fumes. As I said in my initial response, there is an accepted and acknowledged heightened risk to welders of getting this disease from metal fumes. That is believed to be the source of this outbreak.

We have been taking this matter incredibly seriously. One role of the Public Health Agency is to lead the response to clusters and cases of outbreaks of infectious diseases such as this. The health protection service within the PHA has been working with the Belfast Trust, Harland and Wolff and others to prevent further cases. Having identified those at risk, they have, over the weekend, been ensuring that workers were vaccinated and provided with antibiotics.

The Department, the PHA and the health protection service have shown that, in this unfortunate outbreak of pneumococcal disease, they have the capacity and capability to respond appropriately to problems such as this and do a very good job.

Mrs Dobson: I also congratulate the PHA and management of Harland and Wolff for appearing to act so quickly and decisively on this infection. What is the Minister's assessment of how well prepared our services are to cope with any future outbreaks compared with other regions of the UK?

Mr Hamilton: I do not have a comparator for other UK regions. She is right, and I join her in congratulating the PHA for its response to this outbreak. It was able to respond quickly when it became clear that a cluster was developing and get on the ground in Harland and Wolff, in conjunction with the management there and working with the Belfast Trust and others, to ensure that the 450 people, which is a sizeable workforce, have received antibiotics and vaccinations. That that has been completed over a very, very short time is testimony to the good work that the PHA is able to do in instances like this. I hope we do not have many more examples where we can test our readiness for this, but this has been a very good example of where the PHA has been able to do the job that we ask of it and do it very well.

Mr McKinney: Given that the cause was fumes, surely that points to either a failure of equipment or non-provision of effective equipment. What assurance can the Minister give the House that those who are employed directly in this work are getting the proper

equipment to prevent these fumes causing such damage?

Mr Hamilton: I am not in a position to make the assessment that the Member is encouraging me to make, nor would it be appropriate for me to do so. That issue, if it has any impact on the set of circumstances in this outbreak, is one for Harland and Wolff to deal with. I assure the Member and the House that the Health and Safety Executive is continuing to work with Harland and Wolff to ensure that those very issues are addressed. If there are problems associated with this outbreak in respect of equipment and the standard of it, I am sure that the HSE will be able to deal with that in conjunction with Harland and Wolff.

Mr Lyttle: I extend my thoughts to the workers and the families who have been affected by the outbreak and wish them a speedy recovery. I also commend Harland and Wolff for the prompt way in which it responded to the incident. I ask the Minister to confirm that his Department will be doing all it can to support Harland and Wolff to ensure that workers are provided with all the advice and treatment that they need to protect their health and safety and that the company will be able to get the assistance to manage this infection and maintain operations.

Mr Hamilton: I absolutely can give that assurance. I hope that the work that has been conducted over the last number of days illustrates that we are prepared not only to provide the necessary treatment but, as that treatment has been given, to give reassurance and explanations to members of staff as to what has been going on. We will continue to do that as appropriate, although, as I said, I hope that the operational side of our response is complete by this evening and that we will not be required any further. Should it be the case that we are required, I assure the Member that we will respond appropriately.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Minister for his responses so far. Will he tell us whether he is considering the introduction of a population vaccination programme for this disease?

Mr Hamilton: Pneumococcal vaccination programmes are in place but are targeted at specific demographic cohorts; namely, babies, people aged 65 and over and anyone between the ages of two and 65 with a long-term health condition. That is a national policy, and it is based on advice and recommendations that come from the UK Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation. So, that is in

place for those specific groups of people in the wider population. That is obviously then added to by outbreaks such as this, where there are clusters of pneumococcal disease and vaccinations are issued as appropriate.

Private Members' Business

Psychoactive Substances

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly expresses its concern at the impact of legal highs and in particular at the number of resulting deaths; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to continue his work with the Home Office to ensure the introduction of new legislation across the United Kingdom to ban new psychoactive substances. — [Mr Easton.]

Mr McKinney: I beg to move the following amendment:

Leave out all after "Office" and insert

";and to work with his counterpart in the Republic of Ireland in order to consider the benefits of banning the supply of psychoactive substances regardless of chemical composition."

I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate, and I rise in support of the SDLP amendment, which calls for greater cooperation with the Republic in implementing effective legislation to deal with the issue. I thank the proposer of the motion for his consideration of the amendment, and, hopefully, he will find the remarks that I make later helpful.

Over the last number of years, legal — or, should I say, lethal — highs have been an ongoing and increasing problem in our society, and it is our responsibility in this Chamber to do everything possible to limit and restrict the availability of these substances and educate those who may come in contact with them to be aware of the significant dangers that they present. We are now only beginning to form a clearer picture about the impact that psychoactive substances are having on society, but, worryingly, we still have incomplete data on the prevalence of these drugs and a lack of understanding about the acute and longer-term health implications of their use.

We know, for example, that in the UK 251 new psychoactive drugs were identified that were legal and being used by the population in 2012. The Public Health Agency tells us that, on average, one new drug is developed every week. Statistics also show us that drug-related deaths have increased from 102 in 2011 to 115 in 2013, and, locally, we have witnessed the devastating effects that those drugs have on

individuals and their families. Twenty people needlessly lost their lives to lethal doses in 2013, and, as was highlighted earlier, just in April, there was, of course, the death of Adam Owens in Newtownards. Our sympathy goes out to his family.

As has been described, these substances are marketed as technically legal in the eyes of the law, but their availability is as a result of a loophole, if you like. They fall under the remit of the Medicines Act, which makes it illegal to sell, supply or advertise them for human consumption, but sellers, of course, have a number of tactics to get round this. They have been able to manipulate the market simply by putting a label on the package that says, "Not fit for human consumption". They still go on the shelves and are still sold. To compound the issue, the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 does not specifically prohibit the sale or use of technically legal substances, despite the fatal effects that they have on users. It bans psychoactive substances on an individual basis, but, where there is an inevitable time lag between new drugs coming onto the market and those new drugs becoming controlled under the Act itself, that is the very gap. It is a reactive response, and we need a preventative one. The problem is that manufacturers and sellers have been allowed to get around the Act and have altered the chemical composition of certain drugs. In doing so, they also make them more potent.

So it goes on and on. The drugs are ever-changing, and the landscape in which they operate is shrouded in a sort of semi-legality. Ban follows change follows ban. Given that backdrop, it is crucial that we can quickly pursue the most appropriate legislation to control these substances. In that context, I commend the innovative and imaginative approach taken by Belfast City Council and, as we heard from the Justice Minister earlier, the approaches taken in Larne and Omagh. They use the general product safety regulations in counteracting the sale of these drugs, and that enforcement activity has led to the courts granting forfeiture orders against head shops.

These regulations are intended to regulate the market rather than shut down a certain section; but this is only a number of councils. What more could we be doing, and what could we be doing regionally?

3.45 pm

There is a better way, however, and this is at the heart of our amendment. A review of psychoactive substances was conducted by the

Home Office, which appointed an expert panel to look at the issue. It set out to find the best ways to police legal highs and find the best ways to send a clear message to those involved in the trade that these drugs are reckless and dangerous. The panel made a number of recommendations that we hope Westminster will take forward immediately and that this motion and amendment, if agreed, will support.

The report also considered national and international best practice and responses and concluded that the UK should adopt legislation similar to that in the Republic. The Government there listened to the public outcry, acknowledged the health implications and went some way towards limiting the availability of these drugs. Through an Act in 2010, it was made illegal to advertise, sell, or supply for human consumption psychoactive substances not controlled under existing legislation. They effectively moved away from dealing with these drugs solely on an individual basis — the problem we are confronted with — and imposed a blanket ban on all new psychoactive substances.

The benefit of that approach can be witnessed from the fact that 102 head shops were shut down almost overnight, making a dramatic difference. The legislation removed the innovation element, limited demand, provided enforcement agencies with the necessary powers and, ultimately, helped protect the public by reducing antisocial behaviour, deaths and non-fatal health implications. So, the benefits of such legislation in the UK are apparent and they have action to deal with blatant profiteering at the cost of young people's lives and livelihoods.

Too many young people lose their lives needlessly, while others experience great anxiety and varying degrees of depression. Sadly, some take their own lives. We have only to look at the inconsistencies that have arisen from the lack of legislation on this issue to know how big the problem is.

We cannot simply say any more that this matter is not devolved. We need to make a racket at Westminster to ensure that legislation is enacted that is consistent with the Home Office review, so that we can quickly follow in their footsteps and, once and for all, make a real effort to end this lethal trade, which impacts so negatively on our young people. In that context, as I say, more needs to be done at Westminster. The SDLP's three MPs will be there pushing for such action, and I encourage all other MPs from here to do the same. The route map has been spelt out by the Republic,

and, if pursued, would mean that we would have an all-island initiative to disrupt the supply chain for these dangerous drugs and, ultimately, protect life and public health.

The Health and Justice Ministers must work together with their counterparts in the Republic to consider further adopting such legislation, so that we put ourselves on a par with the Republic and increase awareness of the dangers of such legal substances. We cannot continue to bury our heads in the sand and wait for Westminster to act. After all, the public will ask us at some point to do something through devolution. Do we simply wait on Westminster to enact or do we lead a charge from here by saying to Westminster, "Look, there is a route map. Follow your Home Office advice; take the initiative"? The message from here, if we endorse the motion and amendment, as I hope we will do, would be very clearly in favour of following an initiative that is proven to work, has helped to save lives, has helped to put those who are trading in these illicit substances out of business and that has thwarted their profiteering, by which they have contributed to the deaths of many young people whose potential in life has been crippled or ended.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the proposer of the motion. This is a topic that we as a society all grapple with to develop our understanding and, primarily, support our children and young people.

(Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Beggs] in the Chair)

As has been spelt out, it is the stark reality that Ireland has the highest use in Europe of these so-called legal highs. Much of that has resulted in death and grief for many families, across all our communities. There is no doubt that the issue is affecting our communities, right across the island and further afield. It has brought untold grief and pain to many families.

The fact is, as has been pointed out, that the current law is inadequate and that we need to move to enhance the legislation to a general ban. In dealing with the motion and the amendment, both of which I support, it is right to reflect on the fact that the key piece of legislation is the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, which remains the responsibility of Westminster. We need to move, with a degree of urgency, on the recommendation from the expert panel that we need a general ban to be enacted. We need to learn from others and, as the proposer of the amendment has quite rightly outlined, the 26-county Government responded

to community and public outcry by introducing the Criminal Justice (Psychoactive Substances) Act 2010. It is right to reflect that that Act banned a long list of drugs: somewhere in the region of 200. The new law passed to prohibit the sale, in general, of any dangerous or harmful psychoactive substance and, as a result of that work, overnight and in the few weeks following that Act, 150 head shops closed: a very positive outcome for community safety and in upholding the health and well-being of our children and young people.

We look, for example, at a similar fashion in Poland, which passed a new law last year eliminating the open sale of these drugs, and while we can and should reflect on and praise the endeavours of Belfast City Council in relation to the general product safety directive, they have taken that initiative. In my city, Derry City Council, in partnership with the PSNI and the environmental health agencies, has moved to carry out a number of initiatives around head shops, resulting in the closure of one. All that work is very welcome. Through the north-west addiction task force, there have been a similar number of operations resulting in the closure of local premises, and I have no doubt that here is a huge amount of work ongoing across our communities. Organisations locally, such as HURT and Divert, are invaluable in getting the message across, but what makes the issue increasingly serious is that these drugs are purchased online. Quite simply, the young people who I engage with on a fairly regular basis can tell me that these drugs are simply delivered to their door.

We have a duty of care to respond with appropriate legislation. We have seen models of best practice in other places, and we have a duty of care to protect the health and well-being of our children and young people. We need to move with a degree of urgency on this very complex and dangerous issue. I support the motion and the amendment.

Mrs Dobson: I would like to start by expressing my personal sympathy, and that of my party, to young Adam Owens, who recently lost his life in Newtownards as a result of these substances. It is such a terrible loss of a young life. While he was by no means the first, I suspect that, even more tragically, he will not be the last.

Families across Northern Ireland have been ripped apart as a result of these drugs, and we must never forget them, nor the continuing anguish that they are going through. The substances are not safe, and many are not legal. That is why I welcome the mindset of moving away from calling them legal highs,

especially as many come with the effects associated with illegal products.

The repeated emergence of new psychoactive substances is very worrying. Taking any substance that has not been properly tested, is made up of unknown ingredients or has not been prescribed comes with major risks. I am sure that I am not the only Member who has asked on different occasions why the Assembly does not just simply ban them. Aside from it being a reserved matter, it has already been said that the people behind the production of the substances are well aware of the only minor tweaks that they sometimes need to make to the ingredients to stay ahead of the law. However, although a flaw in the current law might keep them from being arrested, in my eyes, those who produce the products, knowing that it will often be children and young adults consuming them, are no better than any drug-related criminal. They may be free to generate pain and misery in return for profit at present, but the gap in the law is starting to close.

The previous Government had their expert panel investigate the issue, and I now fully expect the new Government to take the next step and introduce legislation to ban all psychoactive substances. Of course, banning will be only part of the solution. As we know through bitter experience, illicit drugs are still widely available to anyone who is determined enough to go out and look for them. Given the often younger audience that the substances are aimed at, warning of their dangers, especially through education, is essential. The notion that these drugs are legal, safe and something of a thrill must be ended. Current drug awareness programmes across our schools must be modernised to reflect these particular drugs.

Unfortunately, the task of educating young people about the danger of these drugs is made more difficult because they are widely available from a range of shops, and even takeaways, in towns across Northern Ireland. Putting the tagline "Not for human consumption" on the packaging may help to keep their producers one short step ahead of the law, but, in reality, some young people are now so acquainted with those types of products that they do not even notice that being there.

Local councils do have an important role to play in clamping down on their sale and distribution. The actions taken by Belfast City Council, the former Larne Borough Council and the former Omagh District Council have already been mentioned, but I wish to ask the Minister for his assessment of what other local councils are doing to tackle the sale of those products. This

is not the first debate in the Assembly on the issue, and I suspect that it will not be the last. It would be a tragedy, however, not only for the family of young Adam Owens but for all the others who have been affected by those drugs, if we were to leave the lobbying to someone else. Change is required, and we must not be found wanting in achieving it.

Mr McCarthy: I am grateful for the opportunity to support the motion. Like everyone else in the Assembly, I was shocked and saddened by the tragic death of young Adam Owens from Newtownards in my constituency, who is the latest victim to lose his life from, as we understand it, so-called legal highs or new psychoactive substances. I take this opportunity to offer my total sympathy to the family and friends of young Adam. Their loss must surely be totally devastating. It is incumbent on us as legislators to act as soon as possible to outlaw the availability of those deadly substances so as to prevent further tragedies and heartbreak for everyone in our community.

I also wish to put on record my thanks and appreciation to those organisations out in the community that work so hard to prevent those disasters from happening in the first place, and I totally condemn the merchants who ply their evil trade.

At our Health Committee meeting recently, just after Adam's death, I asked the Committee to seek information from the former Minister of Health on what action can be or is being taken to tackle the issue. His response, dated 7 May, contains two and a half pages of actions, warnings and a determination by his Department, along with the Department of Justice and the PSNI, to sort it out at an early date. I have no doubt that the new Health Minister, who is with us this afternoon — I put on record my congratulations to him and, indeed, to his new assistant, who was a valued member of our Health Committee — will continue with the contents of the response that we got from the former Minister.

4.00 pm

In that letter, the Minister told us that the Executive's agreed strategy recognises the new psychoactive substances as an emerging issue and seeks to direct some £8 million each year to implement the new strategic direction, which is phase 2. While that is very welcome, I believe that the most obvious and effective recourse is through legislation. That will require changes to the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. In

that regard, the Assembly should continue to press the Home Office for changes in the legal regime at a very early date. I know that our Minister of Justice, David Ford, has been pressing the Home Office about the issue, and I am sure that he will continue to do so with the new Government. In fact, during questions for oral answer last month, Mr Ford committed, as he did again today, to taking this up with the new Government. I am sure that he will continue to do so and that progress will hopefully shortly be made to put an end to this blight on our community.

Any legislative response has to be comprehensive. Simply adding new drugs to the existing list of banned substances risks this approach being subverted by small changes or tweaks to ingredients that bypass specific bans. As the former Minister's letter says, the Home Office in London has established an expert panel to look at the UK's legislative response to the issue. Its main recommendation was that the UK Government bring forward a ban on the sale of new psychoactive substances. I say this: "Bring it on now".

The authorities need to avoid playing constant catch-up in a game of constant modification by those making such drugs. In that regard, we can look to the General Product Safety Regulations 2005, and in particular we can commend the actions of Belfast City Council, as other Members have done, and, indeed, other councils. As far as I know, my own council for Ards and North Down has done similar work. Vendors, sellers or whoever simply cannot dismiss responsibility for the use that their products are being put to. That would, indeed, be shameful.

Finally, I believe that education is essential. That will require collaborative working across a number of agencies. The Public Health Agency, with appropriate funding, should have a central role in devising and articulating the core campaign warning young people in particular of the dangers of these substances and the impact upon their lives. There is also an important role for schools, further education colleges and universities to ensure that the relevant messages are being passed on to students. Those organisations working with young people who are not in education, employment or training also have a role.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member must draw his remarks to a close.

Mr McCarthy: We urgently need new legislation from Westminster, supported by the Assembly, to see an end to this scourge in

society. That is why we in the Alliance Party will support the motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member's time is up.

Mr McCarthy: We simply cannot wait.

Mr G Robinson: Last week in the Chamber, thanks to my DUP colleague Gary Middleton, we debated suicide. Today we are debating legal highs. I am forced to wonder whether there could be, in some cases, a connection between the two. Do legal highs lead to suicide or fatal outcomes in a minority of cases? I believe that they do.

This debate is all about people — people who think that it is acceptable to sell highly damaging drugs for personal profit without regard to the damage that is caused to other individuals and families. One report that I read described how a happy teenager was transformed into a suicidal teenager by legal highs. Does any Member present believe that that is an acceptable situation? Is it morally correct that, in Northern Ireland, we continue to let children as young as 11 have access to such dangerous substances? For me, the answer is a definite no to both questions. We must therefore act to stop these substances being made available, especially on the Internet, which, I was shocked to learn, still makes buying these deadly drugs relatively simple. Some websites even tell visitors which legal highs are already banned and cannot, therefore, be purchased.

Reading of the aftermath that these drugs have for individuals and families is a distressing requirement for the debate, but the facts are also a reality for many families in Northern Ireland. Legal highs ruin lives, end lives and destroy families. I believe, therefore, that they must be made illegal.

I appreciate the fact that my colleague the Health Minister has just taken up his post, which I congratulate him on, but I ask him to continue the work of his predecessors on psychoactive substances so that, at the earliest possible moment, we can take definitive action against the sale of these deadly drugs. I most definitely support this very worthy motion.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom tacú leis an rún seo inniu agus leis an leasú fosta. I support the motion and the amendment. The issue has been debated in the Assembly before. We have talked about it, and the

connection with suicide has been mentioned. We are all only too aware that the issue has to be dealt with. We cannot just go on allowing it to happen. Action needs to be taken.

One aspect of these psychoactive substances that I find absolutely insidious is the title "legal high". That is very misleading and misleads young people into thinking that they are not so serious. The names that are given to the substances also sound quite innocent. I find all that shameful and despicable, because it allows the sellers to get away with selling products that have such damaging effects on people. They use a convenient disclaimer that the products are not fit for human consumption, but it is a fact that they are sold only for human consumption. It is imperative that we deal with this.

The other aspect — it has been mentioned already — is that, because the substances are unregulated, they are not tested or approved. Their content is totally unknown, and young people do not really know what they are taking. The devastating result is that, the more that people use the substances, the more their physical and mental health is in danger. The side effects are numerous and range from increased anxiety to problems with breathing, loss of consciousness and hallucinations. We have also heard people speaking about the many deaths that have occurred as a result of taking the substances.

This is a reserved matter and is governed under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, but there are limitations on the powers of that Act. That is not enough for us, and we need to seek our solutions in the North so that we can tackle the problem head-on.

There have been positive advances. It was mentioned that Belfast City Council had responded innovatively by using existing regulations. That was a good step forward. It utilised the General Product Safety Regulations 2005, which resulted in the successful prosecution of a number of individuals who faced charges of supplying a dangerous product — new psychoactive substances — from a city centre shop. Under the terms of the court order, those people are prohibited from selling those substances anywhere in the North. Other councils have followed suit, and more are expected to take the same action. My colleague Maeve McLaughlin talked about the legislation in the South of Ireland, which has had very positive outcomes in addressing the issue. At the same time, it is a very manipulative process. New substances come out week on week, and you can never take your

eye off the ball. We all need to live up to that and deal with it. We can never be complacent; it is a problem that will always seek new ways to reinvent itself, and we need to be ahead of the game.

My constituency of West Belfast has a huge and growing problem. The impacts have been devastating. Many organisations have been mentioned today, but a local one, the Falls Community Council, has been at the forefront in tackling substance abuse and its effects on young people. Day and daily, it sees the damage that results and how young people become victims of the trade. Its work has very positive impacts, and it works to help young people to move away from the use of all kinds of drugs.

A while back, I attended a public event organised by the West Belfast district policing and community safety partnership (DPCSP) as part of the west Belfast féile. It focused on legal highs —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member draw her remarks to a close?

Ms McCorley: — and their impact on the community. I would like to mention Mothers Against Drugs, which is an organisation that was set up by a group of mothers who have been impacted by this. Their work in taking action on the issue has to be commended. I commend the motion.

Mr Buchanan: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this important matter. It is right that we take a moment to remember the families who have been torn apart and the young people who have lost their life as a result of these substances in Northern Ireland.

It is good that, since I last brought the subject to the Floor of the House for debate in November 2014, changes have happened, albeit slowly. In my constituency in West Tyrone, a shop that was openly selling psychoactive substances, commonly referred to by the misleading name of "legal highs", was closed down as a direct result of a court order banning the sale of these substances in a Belfast shop. That development has had a ripple effect throughout the Province, as named individuals and a limited company were prevented from selling substances from premises in Belfast and right across Northern Ireland. As a direct result of the court order, premises in Omagh were closed down.

While I am delighted with that outcome, I am concerned that these products are still being openly sold on the streets of Omagh, which the PSNI seems to be powerless to curb. In Omagh, however, anecdotal evidence suggests that a list of regular users of these substances now receives deliveries of their chosen drugs to their home. The ease with which customers can order the drugs and have lethal substances sent to their home is alarming. Taking a quick glance through the numerous websites that offer the substances for sale, I see that they boast that home deliveries will be inconspicuously packaged in an unmarked envelope. Students in our universities and colleges are getting the drugs delivered to their room. It is the sharp rise in the easy availability of the drugs that is extremely worrying.

Why is it that the Government are always playing catch-up with the manufacturers of the drugs? The UK Government lag behind other jurisdictions that are leading the way in this fight. While I am delighted that we have had some small victories along the way, such as Belfast City Council tackling the matter outside the Misuse of Drugs Act by approaching it from a safety perspective, it is but a small drop in the ocean in comparison with the sales of the substances. The UK Government at Westminster need to look at proactive models for tackling these substances rather than always reacting and playing catch-up with the drug manufacturers, who have the ability to produce a new unregulated product very quickly after a ban comes into play. Legislation needs to be introduced to make it an offence to sell, import, export or advertise unregulated psychoactive substances, alongside the ongoing controls on identified substances under the existing misuse of drugs legislation.

As a result of the introduction of the Criminal Justice (Psychoactive Substances) Act 2010 in the South of Ireland, as already mentioned today, nearly all the head shops were closed down, and the national drugs unit was established to tackle online sales, which is obviously another very important issue. It is imperative that the UK Government make provision in any new legislation to tackle the ease with which sales of these products happen online. Domain names of websites that sell the products need to be reported to a dedicated branch in the PSNI.

4.15 pm

Just because the products are not banned through the Misuse of Drugs Act, that does not mean that they are safe. They are unregulated and no one, not the customer nor the medical

professional who may have to deal with the dire consequences of their use, knows what is in them or what the consequences will be. Psychoactive substances have potentially harmful effects ranging from numerous side effects to death. The extent of the risk to individuals across Northern Ireland, particularly young people, is huge. Far, far too many of our young people are being caught up with these substances —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member draw his remarks to a close?

Mr Buchanan: — and finding themselves in extreme difficulties. I am delighted that Belfast City Council did not rest on its laurels but instead chose to tackle the problem. I urge the Minister to continue to take this forward in a way that will —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member's time is up.

Mr Buchanan: — have a sustained effect in Northern Ireland.

Mr Middleton: I begin by joining others in thanking my colleagues for tabling this important motion.

There is no doubt that this is a serious issue in our communities and that psychoactive substances are having detrimental effects right across Northern Ireland. Misuse of the substances has become a worryingly popular trend that many young people and community members believe to be morally and legally acceptable because there is no penalty for obtaining them. That is why we need to address this as a matter of urgency. We must stand together to let our communities and our precious youth know that these substances are neither morally nor legally acceptable. We must act out of care to protect our communities from the use of the substances. The misconception of such substances being known as "legal highs" must be tackled because many psychoactive substances contain illegal elements.

The dangerous use of drugs is an ever-growing problem in our society. Many of our young people are becoming addicted to substances and drugs at a very young age. It has to be said that the effects of the drugs on all members of our society and increasingly among the youth of our communities is devastating. Once individuals are addicted, they often need to feed their addiction by trying new substances with even greater life-threatening risks. Sadly,

it has been noted that, as a result of substance and drug abuse, communities begin to see an increase in antisocial behaviour and burglaries as people seek to fund their addiction.

Psychoactive substances negatively affect our communities. Many parents, as other Members have mentioned, have been left devastated because of the unpredictable reactions of their son or daughter as a result of taking the drugs. It is a problem that many families in my constituency have faced and, indeed, that families throughout Northern Ireland face daily. This is a serious and real concern as, in many instances, the ingredients contained in these substances are unknown and unregulated.

As the proposer stated, they are packaged so as to bypass the system and current legislation. Sadly, the substances are readily available in head shops in our towns and cities and on the online market. With such easy access to these perilous so-called legal highs, there needs to be a strategic approach to getting them off our streets and out of the marketplace. I commend the work of some councils and, indeed, the PSNI, which my fellow member for Foyle mentioned, in our constituency in tackling the head shops. I hope that similar methods can be implemented throughout all our council areas. As my colleagues have said, the Home Office must do all that it can to introduce new legislation across the United Kingdom to ban these substances.

Whilst it is important that we make the substances illegal, the problem must be tackled at its source. In reality, the majority of so-called legal highs are bought online from suppliers outside the UK and, indeed, outside Europe. As I mentioned, the ingredients are often unknown and what is written on the packaging is very different from what is in the substance itself. Such unlimited global online access to these products is deeply concerning and means that very many people are accessing them.

Just last week in the Chamber, we discussed the sensitive topic of suicide prevention. As a result of legal highs, individuals' characters are changing and their mental health is deteriorating, sometimes resulting in them taking their own life. As with tackling suicide and promoting mental health, there needs to be cross-partnership working at all levels to ensure that the necessary help is available to prevent suicide and to support those who have addictions.

I hope that the new Government in Westminster and our Health Minister will do all they can to finally take action that will help to save lives and

ensure a safer environment for all our citizens. I wholeheartedly support the motion and the amendment.

Mr B McCrea: I wrote to the Minister of Justice last month about the issue of legal highs. As has been mentioned in the debate, the response was that it is not a devolved matter. However, he said that a number of successful strategies are being used by the health service and the local councils, including using consumer legislation, to deal with the matter.

The reason why I wrote to the Minister of Justice, and the reason why I am speaking today, is that I was contacted online by a lady called Grainne Woods, who mentioned to me the tragic death of Adam Owens. She said, "Basil, something urgently needs to be done to protect our young people from legal highs. This lad pleaded for help. Can you help raise this concern?"

I wanted to talk today to not just implore somebody to do something but to say that there is a real issue: people who know that they have a problem and are seeking help are not able to get it. I am struck by the description of Adam. He was 17, and he died in Newtownards. He had been to a house party with friends. He had known that he had a problem for about three years. He kept saying that he was going to turn his life around. Perhaps part of our attention should be placed on how we give advice and support to people rather than just saying, "These are illegal".

I was also struck last night; I came across a really tragic situation in Dublin. It is not quite the same, but it is pretty close: the sudden death of a 19-year-old who took some form of ecstasy that had been adulterated with poison. The real problem was that, although they got medics to her, they were not able to do anything. The doctor said — this is the issue with legal highs as well — that the problem is that there is such a cocktail of drugs in the tablets now that nobody really knows exactly what is in them. There is simply no way to provide the appropriate medical attention.

All that leads me to conclude that the issue of drug culture in our society is perhaps one that we have to deal with. Even now, there is discussion about whether there are health benefits from cannabis, what exactly the effective ingredients in it are and whether it is something that we should be looking at with regard to medicinal use. The whole issue is about understanding exactly what the active ingredients are. I am really sorry for the families of Adam Owens and Ana Hick, who

saw the tragic loss of their children. We, as legislators, maybe need to think about how we engage in a proper debate about the drugs culture. It is one of the more significant issues affecting our society.

It is not really necessary for me to prolong the debate. Speaking at this stage in the Chamber, much of what has to be said has been said, but it is perhaps worth saying that we need to do something and not just implore others to do something. It is not possible for us to do anything through legislation on matters that are not devolved, but I suspect that it would be a good thing if the parties with MPs were to use their good offices to try to deal with the matter.

I would be interested to hear what the Minister has to say about how we provide support to people struggling with an addiction to dangerous substances. Frankly, whether they are legal or not is irrelevant; the fact is that those things do a lot of harm. It is part of the fabric of our society. It is not the right way forward for young people, but telling them that it is not the right way forward is not going to change anything. We need creative, effective intervention that will explain to our people, "These are the risks that you are facing". On that, Mr Deputy Speaker, I conclude my remarks.

Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I begin by thanking Mr Easton and Mrs Cameron for bringing the motion to the Floor. Indeed, I thank everyone who has spoken today.

One of the most important public health challenges facing us is the need to prevent and reduce the harm that alcohol and drug misuse causes to individuals, families and wider communities. Episodes, such as the major incident that occurred at the Odyssey last year, or, more tragically, the number of potentially drug-related deaths that have occurred recently, serve to highlight the real consequences of substance misuse. I join others in passing on my condolences to all families who have, tragically, been affected by the issue.

Worryingly, a new challenge has arisen through the availability and use of so-called legal highs, an issue that has, unfortunately and sadly, been brought to the fore again by the recent tragic death of Adam Owens, a 17-year-old former pupil of my old school, Regent House, who died in Newtownards in April. I extend my sympathy to Adam's family and pass on my condolences to them.

These are substances that have a psychoactive effect but which are not classified under the UK-wide Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. However, the term "legal highs" is misleading. We should, therefore, try as best as we possibly can to refer to them as new psychoactive substances (NPS). The key message that needs to come from the Chamber today is that these substances are not safe. They are marked, "Not for human consumption" for a reason, as the sellers are trying to get round our existing drug laws and regulations.

Let us be absolutely clear, Mr Deputy Speaker: taking any substance that has not been prescribed for you comes with real risks. These new psychoactive substances have not been tested, they do not go through quality assurance, there is no way of knowing what they actually contain, and, therefore, they are potentially more dangerous than drugs such as Ecstasy or cannabis. In fact, they may not even be legal. Test purchases conducted by the police and forensic services across the UK, in 2013-14, showed that almost 20% of NPS contained drugs controlled under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. So, in fact, one in five substances sold as so-called legal highs is not legal, and anyone purchasing them could be arrested for possession of a controlled substance.

Given the nature of the issue, it is difficult to get an accurate picture of how prevalent the misuse of these substances is. However, a survey in 2010-11 indicated that 2% and 2.4% of the population had taken the then legal Mephedrone and new psychoactive substances respectively. Things may have changed since then, and that survey is being rerun to give a clearer picture about the current extent of use. In 2013-14, figures from our treatment services also indicated that 15% of those in treatment reported the use of the now banned Mephedrone.

I move now to tackling supply. As many highlighted today, the key legislation, the 1971 Misuse of Drugs Act, is a reserved matter and is led by the UK Government at Westminster. Therefore this is an area that my Department has raised through the British-Irish Council and the North/South Ministerial Council, and I will ensure that it remains on the agenda of those key groups.

The enforcement of the Misuse of Drugs Act is the responsibility of the PSNI. My Department also helps to address the issue through the enforcement of human medicines regulations. Where the sale of new psychoactive

substances breaches either of those pieces of legislation, enforcement activity can be, and is, undertaken.

In addition, Belfast City Council, supported by a range of key agencies, has undertaken enforcement activity against so-called head shops using the general product safety regulations. That has resulted in a forfeiture order. Further action has led to an injunction against one premises selling these substances anywhere in Northern Ireland. That is to be broadly welcomed. I know that other councils have been watching Belfast's approach, and I hope that that will encourage them to take similar action in their areas. I recognise and acknowledge reference made by many Members today to some councils and the action that they are taking.

In 2011, following approaches from various stakeholders, including my Department, the UK Government amended the Misuse of Drugs Act to incorporate a new classification for placing drugs under temporary control for up to 12 months. It is worth acknowledging that those temporary banning powers were primarily a result, I understand, of pressure from Northern Ireland because of the prevalence of the use of psychoactive substances here.

4.30 pm

This temporary banning power is aimed at tackling the threat that new substances pose to public health by responding on a cautionary basis. It has been a good first step in addressing the issue. So far, temporary or permanent bans have been imposed on more than 350 substances, and, when combined with enforcement activity, help us begin to tackle the issue. However, we have to do more. New substances continue to emerge at the rate of one new drug a week. That is why previous Ministers at my Department have regularly raised this issue with the Home Secretary, in seeking a more robust and consistent approach.

Following that lobbying, the Home Office established an expert panel to look at the UK's legislation. The panel reported in late 2014. Its main recommendation was that the UK Government bring forward legislation to undertake a general ban on the sale of psychoactive substances, while providing exemptions for existing products, such as alcohol and prescription medicines. I understand that this proposal is similar to legislation already brought forward in Ireland. To refer to the amendment, I am content to continue to work with colleagues across the

border and learn from their experience, particularly in outlawing psychoactive substances. I am pleased that Her Majesty's Government have broadly accepted the recommendation. The Home Office is working with us and the other devolved Administrations to develop appropriate proposals. I hope that legislation can be brought forward early in the life of the new UK Government. My officials and I will continue to work with the Home Office to see it brought forward as soon as possible, and I ask all parties' MPs to support this work as it goes through the legislative process at Westminster.

As some Members mentioned, the Internet also plays a role. Although addressing sales in head shops may be only part of the solution, it would be an important step. The availability of these substances on our high streets has the potential to change social norms; therefore, stopping these sales will send a clear message that drug misuse is not acceptable and not part of everyday life. However, I recognise that we also need to work with our UK Government and other EU member states to address the issue in a broader context, including working with agencies such as Interpol to tackle international sales.

To improve local information, we have also set up an early warning system in partnership with the PSNI, the Public Health Agency and the Department of Justice. The drug and alcohol monitoring and information system seeks to get information, identify new substances and provide advice as soon as possible. The system has been used to disseminate information about a range of substances, and the Chief Medical Officer has issued a number of alerts based on its information. It is also used to feed into the permanent or temporary banning processes and to inform policy and practice. My Department and the Public Health Agency will continue to use this information to raise awareness of the dangers of these substances and to put appropriate treatment services in place.

We commission and provide a range of treatment and support services across Northern Ireland, from education and information, through early intervention and harm reduction, up to specialist treatment and, to refer to Mr McCrea's comments, support services. These services are detailed on the Public Health Agency website. Although none of these services deals with new psychoactive substances in isolation, they are all equipped to deal with alcohol and drug misuse generally. From a treatment perspective, while these substances are new, they often mimic existing

drugs, therefore treatment services should be able to deal with those presenting under existing treatment models. It should be noted that the PHA is currently in the process of re-tendering for a range of services that are due to come on stream in July 2015. The new services will be tasked with addressing emerging issues including new psychoactive substances.

The PHA is working to develop the alcohol and drug misuse workforce, including rolling out training on NPS and other substances. New evidence and research will also feed into treatment models and guidelines as appropriate.

That is an overview of the work being taken forward on new psychoactive substances. However, we recognise that there are no easy answers. There are considerable gaps in our knowledge and understanding of psychoactive substances, and there will remain a range of residual and future challenges that will need to be addressed, as there is with illicit drug use. However, we remain committed to tackling this issue. We need to ensure that we continue to get the message out that taking any drug that has not been prescribed for you has real risks for your mental, emotional and physical well-being. In fact, as we have seen recently, it has the potential to have tragic and fatal consequences.

Mr Byrne: I welcome the opportunity to wind up on today's important debate. I rise in support of the SDLP amendment and welcome the support across the House for it.

As Members have said, the issue of legal highs or new psychoactive substances is complex and difficult, but there is no doubt that action can be taken so that we can go some way in attempting to tackle the issue. The public are looking for the Assembly to take some action. It is understandable that most of us are increasingly concerned about the growing availability of substances that are sold as legal highs. We need to discourage the use of that term because, unfortunately, it leads people to assume that they must be safe when they are not. As many Members have rightly said, a number of deaths in Northern Ireland have been linked to taking such products. We saw 20 people die from taking one substance in 2013 alone, and, as others have mentioned, there was another death just last month in Newtownards.

We have had a number of important cases in Omagh to do with the problem as well. Recently, in the local newspaper, the 'Tyrone

Herald', an example was given of a tradesman who is responsible for training young joiners:

"He recounted the experience of a 27-year-old Omagh man who he knows personally. 'He is mentally scarred for the rest of his life, he will never be right again,' he claimed. He said the parents of the man contacted him several months ago asking for help. 'We spent hours with him trying to talk with him, but it was going in one ear and out the other. He just couldn't take it in, he wasn't all there. We were trying everything to get him off it. His mother was in a terrible state, she had nowhere to turn to for help'".

Mr McCrea referred to that. The article continues:

"The devastation this causes to families is unbelievable. When this young fella was on these drugs, his family couldn't even stay in the house.' Eventually health professionals agreed to intervene, but only when accompanied by police officers. That intervention came several months ago and according to the joiner, the 27-year-old has been kept under medical care since. 'He's lost all of his faculties, he's not all there now'".

That is the tragedy of what is happening.

Although the control of drugs is a reserved issue, the challenges that emerge from these new substances should be of more concern to the Assembly. Great work has been undertaken by Belfast City Council and, indeed, some other councils, but, as Mr Buchanan said, he raised the issue here months ago because of the plight and concern of some parents and families.

In our amendment, we have asked for cooperation with the Government in the Republic. We need that sort of cooperation. In Omagh, we had the situation of a head shop that was owned by someone who also had a shop in Letterkenny. When the Letterkenny shop closed as a result of the legislation in the South, all the sales were coming through the Omagh shop. We had a situation where students would be queueing up in the evening to buy some of these legal highs in their uniforms, and they were also able to resell them to their classmates and friends. Again, the authorities were slow to recognise the plight and the difficulty that that was posing for parents and teachers.

These drugs do, to some degree, also fall under the remit of the Medicines Act 1968, which makes it illegal to sell, supply or advertise them

for human consumption. Manufacturers and sellers have been able to manipulate the market to the detriment of our young people. All they need to do is label the package with the disclaimer, "Not fit for human consumption". The Minister referred to the fact that these drugs are not fit for human consumption. The problem is that young people will often take things that are not fit for human consumption if it gives them this high experience. However, the high experience is so high that it causes mental damage. Many Members have referred to the fact that we have major mental health problems as a result of the use of these illegal substances. It is causing massive pain.

The time has come for action. There has been obfuscation by the Minister of Justice and others, hiding behind the fact that primary legislation is required. The reality is that action could have been taken earlier. Let us have the action now.

Mrs Cameron: I welcome the opportunity to make the winding-up speech on this very important matter today and take the opportunity to welcome Minister Hamilton to his new and very difficult role of dealing with the health service in Northern Ireland.

As everyone in the House has recognised, the need for greater control on new psychoactive substances has never been more important, and, along with the Home Office, we must continue to press for tighter controls on this reserved issue as a matter of urgency. New psychoactive substances, or legal highs, are on open sale across the United Kingdom, and I believe that a joined-up approach is long overdue.

The obvious disparity in drug regulation has led to a shift in social attitudes surrounding misuse and, in many ways, has normalised the taking of those substances among young people. Through the media and television, we are all familiar with the images of seedy drug deals taking place on street corners and in dark alleyways. Although the drugs are rightly prohibited under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, we are dealing with an epidemic of substances being dealt in plain sight in so-called head shops across Northern Ireland and openly through the Internet. The substances have not been tested. There is no quality assurance, and there is no way of knowing what exactly they contain, as often what is listed on the packaging is far from the actual chemical components making up the product. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the effects can be much worse than those of other illegal drugs such as cocaine and Ecstasy, simply

because the components regularly change as compounds are identified and banned. It is particularly worrying that the substances are very often taken in polydrug usage, combined with a cocktail of alcohol and other illegal drugs or prescription medications. That combination of stimulants, hallucinogens and depressants can lead to breathing difficulties, anxiety, collapse and, in the worst cases, even death.

In 2013-14, 20 deaths were linked to new psychoactive substances in Northern Ireland. My fear is that the figure may be much greater than that owing to the difficulties with forensic identification. In addition, I am concerned that people are putting their long-term mental and physical health at risk. There have been many reported cases of psychotic episodes following periods of prolonged use, with some occurring long after the user has stopped taking the substances. It has also been documented that infection with HIV and hepatitis B and C is higher among users of those substances, as they may be more prone to entering into unprotected sexual encounters or sharing needles.

At this point, I want to refer to some of the comments made in the Chamber today, which were many. I will start with the proposer of the motion, Mr Easton, who spoke of the accessibility of legal highs. He talked about the misleading term "legal high", which makes the substances sound safe or legal for human consumption. He spoke about the sheer volume and speed with which the substances appear on the market and also about the various organisations that are attempting to tackle the use of legal highs, including local government. He stated that, in 2013, the Home Office appointed an expert panel to consider how the issue of new psychoactive substances could be addressed. He accepted the amendment from the SDLP but stressed the need for legislation to deal specifically with the issue. He added that the issue of legal highs is too important for us to play politics with.

Mr McKinney moved the amendment, and he spoke of the need for individuals to be aware of the danger of legal — or "lethal", as he said — highs. He talked about how the number of drug-related deaths has risen and said that substances marketed as technically legal by sellers can manipulate the market by stating that they are not fit for human consumption.

Ms McLaughlin talked about the stark reality that Ireland has the highest use of such substances in Europe. She also mentioned the untold grief and pain that has been brought to families. She talked about the enhancement of

legislation to a general ban and about the need to move on the recommendations from the expert panel. She welcomed the closure of the very many head shops.

4.45 pm

Mrs Dobson spoke about the families across Northern Ireland that have been ripped apart as a result of these drugs, and she welcomed the move away from the description "legal highs". She mentioned that it is a reserved matter and said that those who produce these products are no better than drug dealers. She also said that change is required.

Mr McCarthy said that he was shocked and saddened by the death of Adam Owens, and I know that Adam Owens was mentioned a number of times during the debate. Mr McCarthy spoke of the Minister and the Department's response to previous similar issues, and he said that, for him, the most obvious and effective recourse is the introduction of legislation. He talked about the fact that David Ford has raised the matter in his capacity as Justice Minister, and he also said that education is essential.

Mr Robinson asked whether there is a link between suicide and the use of legal highs. He spoke about how these highly damaging drugs are being sold for personal profit without regard to the damage that is caused to individuals and their families. He spoke passionately and asked whether it is morally right that Northern Ireland continues to let children as young as 11 have access to such dangerous substances. He called for those substances to be made illegal.

Ms McCorley supported the motion and the amendment. She said that the issue needs to be dealt with and that the description "legal high" is misleading. She also said that the people who sell the product are shameful and despicable.

Mr Buchanan said that it is right that we remember those who lost their life through the use of these substances. I am sure we can all echo that across the Chamber. He was concerned that the products are being sold openly in Omagh, and he spoke about the ease of accessing the drugs. He said that the sharp rise in this type of drug use is extremely worrying and that legislation needs to be introduced. He said that the drugs are unregulated and that their contents are unknown.

Mr Middleton was in no doubt that it is a serious issue and that the misuse of these substances is a worryingly popular trend. He said that the substances are not morally acceptable and that many young people are becoming addicted to drugs like this. He said that communities are seeing an increase in antisocial behaviour, and he talked about the global and unlimited access to these drugs.

Mr McCrea said that he had written to the Minister of Justice on the issue and was told that it is not a devolved matter. He also mentioned the tragic case of Adam Owens. He talked about the cocktail of drugs and the fact that we have no way of knowing what exactly is in them. He mentioned the provision of support to those suffering from addiction and said that there should be some creative intervention on the matter.

Whilst other areas can learn from the inroads made by Belfast City Council and Omagh council in policing the sale of these products through the General Product Safety Regulations 2005, and although the Home Secretary has moved to introduce temporary drug banning orders, I believe that more must be done to remove this blight. The volume of these substances reaching our streets is truly frightening, and the speed with which new formulations are being developed is staggering. As we play cat and mouse with commercial chemists and those who wish to profit from the misery of others, the people of Northern Ireland who take those substances are putting their life at risk.

I am aware that the Minister's predecessors have been working with the Home Officer to introduce UK-wide legislation to ban new psychoactive substances. As the Minister begins his new role, I trust that he will continue the work to ensure that we are doing all that we can to remove these dangerous substances from our streets. I will do all that I can, personally and as a member of the Health Committee, to support that work. I wish my colleague every success in this matter, and I give him my best wishes going forward in his new ministerial position. I support the motion.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly expresses its concern at the impact of legal highs and in particular at the

number of resulting deaths; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to continue his work with the Home Office; and to work with his counterpart in the Republic of Ireland in order to consider the benefits of banning the supply of psychoactive substances regardless of chemical composition.

Adjourned at 4.50 pm.

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